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**Untangling the Knots: Understanding the Hair Politics of Black  
Femininity in a Post-Apartheid Context**

by

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Approved by:

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Dr Jane Bennett (Supervisor)

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Introduction**

I enter into this research with multiple intentions and a strong commitment to produce and reimagine ways of understanding gendered subjectivities. The commitment sits deeply in my subjective localities as African feminist researcher, African woman and woman dedicated to the project of voicing women's experiences as central and crucial to the production of knowledge, particularly on the continent. This project has been an immensely personal journey of excavation and necessarily a political engagement with the research material. My central aim involves the politics of bodily performance, in negotiation with shifting realities of a post-Apartheid context, where constructions of gender, race and class are both mobile and stagnant.

During this research, I have been involved in a South African Netherlands Program for Alternatives in Development (SANPAD) research project. This project is entitled, 'Forging Coca-Cola identities: an exploration into how youth utilize popular culture to reshape gendered identities and sexual cultures in post-Apartheid townships on the Cape Flats, South Africa'. This project critically engages the role of popular culture in influencing youth cultures. In a context such as South Africa, such a project aims to shed light on the ways youth cultures are being constructed through negotiating meanings of popular culture within the dynamics of political history. Within this framework, I was required to formulate a research project that addressed some of the key issues of the

construction of young femininities within changing class and cultural contexts. I chose to research constructions of beauty as they are articulated through the politics of hair. I wanted to use the politics of hair as a lens into bodily performances, which negotiate political constructions of class, race and gender. By using the lens of constructions of beauty, I intended on critically addressing contemporary cultural constructions of femininity as embedded in discourses of popular culture. I focused on young black middle class women located in a post-Apartheid context. I argue that their post-Apartheid locations position these women in critical relationship to the dynamic meanings of class and race in which I am interested, providing nuanced ways of deconstructing understandings of gendered subjectivities.

I have drawn upon a multilayered approach to theorizing the research I have conducted. After locating my own research within rich theory on the politics of racialized and gendered body performativity (with an especial interest in the significance of hair), I examine the hairstyling practices of black middle class women. This is followed by analysis of the diverse meanings of these practices as they relate to gendered subjectivities. Having established the links between meanings of hairstyles as they are embedded in the aesthetics of beauty, I look at how constructions of beauty shape the understanding and performance of black femininities as they are negotiating contemporary South African cultures of class.

The research aims in my proposal are as follows;

- To examine the constructions of black femininity through varied notions of beauty as it is primarily expressed through engagement of hair
- To draw upon analyses of performativity and hair to explore other realms of bodily performance as a realm of subjectivity (such as attire, skin hue, and so on)
- To investigate the degrees of personal agency women experience in constructing their gendered identity amidst the constructions
- To analyze notions of the aesthetics of black beauty within changing political currencies in post-Apartheid South Africa

The research I have conducted is located in what I term a ‘post-Apartheid moment’ (Hart 2002). This moment is highly textured and layered with social, political and historical disjuncture that forms the fabric through which this research is knit. I suggest that blackness as an identity is afflicted by particular political vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities are the result of a violent and degrading political regime, Apartheid. This regime was necessarily aimed at eroding black people’s sense of worth and identity. While I argue that these vulnerabilities have taken on new shape in a South Africa that has undergone rapid institutional and political changes in the past thirteen years, blackness remains in a contested process of self-redefinition. The emergence of a growing black elite has caused a re-evaluation of the social, cultural and political meanings of blackness. Through shifts in class positioning ‘the post-Apartheid moment’ is taking shape within an intensely dynamic context.

I draw upon Judith Butler for her work on performativity and analyzing how the body takes shape through *repetitive and normalizing* acts. (Butler, 1993). Butler works with notions of 'sex', 'gender' and 'performance' in making sense of how these concepts work upon and through the body while embodied in social and politically charged discourses. (Butler, 1997). I also use the works of Mama (1995) and hooks (1992) in understanding constructions of multiple subjectivities 'in three dimensions', race, class and gender. Mama writes extensively on the constructions of black British female subjectivities. Mama theorizes subjectivities as multiple and constantly in motion. She argues that subjectivities are constituted through processes of historicity where discursive practices shape peoples lives. (Mama,1995). It is this theorization that will assist my own analysis of my participants' collective and individual constructions of subjectivity. hooks reflects on the representations of black female bodies in popular culture and in so doing challenges racist and sexist notions that perpetuate these images (hooks, 1992). This is particularly important for my research when thinking through how bodily performances occur through the axis of race and class. Banks' (2000) work on hair, race and femininity will guide my research in understanding the intersections of gender and race as articulated through the lens of the politics of hair. Mercer (1994), will take this analysis further and consider the ways hair as a site for political contestation has created subjectivities deeply inflicted by racial ideologies.

I have also drawn on select pieces of South African literature on beauty, hair politics, fashion and style, namely, Ribane (2006) and Erasmus (2000). Ribane's work has been useful in writing a genealogy for the South African beauty industry over the past forty

years. Zimitri Erasmus' work guided much of my own thinking on how racial ideologies create political and social meanings for beauty and hairstyling. Erasmus focuses on how within a racially stratified community, hair can act as "both a cultural construct and a site of contestation", and how this construct becomes a part of everyday practices. (Erasmus, 2000:381).

Black women across the globe have been inscribing new and dynamic ways of performing femininities that take the aesthetics of beauty and specifically hair into serious consideration. As Ingrid Banks states "hair is one of the first things to catch our eye, and can convey important political and cultural meanings and group identity." (Banks, 2000:2). There are new scholarly works arising on the politics of hair for black women. These include *Ain't I a Beauty Queen* by Maxine Leeds Craig (2002), *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture and African American women* by Noliwe M. Rooks (1996). There are also critical literary texts, such as *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison (1970) that engage the highly fraught nature of conceptualizing beauty for black women. All of these books take individual perspectives of the social and political meanings of hair amongst African American women and the ways beauty is constructed for African American women in the United States. This literature are important for theorizing on black women's experiences of negotiating identity as it is gendered and raced, within a particular Western context, as their subjectivities are positioned through the surveillance of dominant discourse that prescribes particular ways of being beautiful (Morrison, 1970; Leeds Craig, 2002 Walker, 1985). This work is rooted in the experience of African American women's lives and as such speaks to the history and social constructions of

identity in North America. This is not to say that these literary texts cannot be useful in the commitment to produce new knowledge on women's experiences that account for some of the gaps in the literature. African American writing on constructions of beauty, race and femininity has been useful in my own thinking of how these theoretical aspects develop in a South African context. I have drawn heavily on literature from feminist writers located in North America, as will become clearer in the literature review. It is important, at the outset, however, to recognize the void in scholarly writing on African women's experiences of constructions of beauty and the meanings they have for lived experiences. There are many texts by African women on the experiences of their lives in South Africa. These historical autobiographical stories can be cited and used to critically think through the multiple meanings of women's experiences in a South African context. Books such as *Call me Woman*, by Ellen Kuzwayo, *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life*, by Emma Mashini, all depict personal narratives of the politics of living and mobilizing in Apartheid South Africa (Kuzwayo, 1985; Mashini, 1991). These are valuable literary texts, but they do not offer any critical understanding or reflection on the politics and notions of beauty as it relates to constructing gendered subjectivities.

I have, however, been guided by available literature on contemporary young black women's lives in South Africa, particularly literature that does not pathologize the experience of being young and black as only related to danger, poverty and violence or HIV/AIDS. Mamphela Ramphele writes *Steering by the Stars: Being young in South Africa* as a way of understanding and telling the stories of young people in post-Apartheid South Africa (2002). I initially intended on using this book as a means for

understanding and locating young peoples lived realities in South Africa. Upon a closer reading of the book, it became evident that Ramphele's work reflected the very pathologizing of youth cultures that I had initially tried to avoid.

“The stories in this book capture some of the struggles waged by young people of New Crossroads who are not yet benefiting from the fruits of post-Apartheid South Africa. Theirs is a life experience bearing all the scars of the legacy of the past. Inadequate social amenities. Overcrowded homes. The daily grind of poverty that undermines the dignity of ordinary citizens and makes for stressful family relationships. Underperforming schools that provide little hope for a better future for them compared to their uneducated parents. Violent homes, schools and streets that add to the general insecurity in New Crossroads as is the case in many other Black townships. And yet these are also stories of hope-that eternal burning flame in the souls of so many who refuse to give up” (Ramphele, 2002:11).

Ramphele paints a bleak picture of the lives of young people particularly located in South African townships. She highlights a social political context that she suggests frames the lives of these young people. I think that this framing is necessary to critically evaluate where South Africa is going as a new democracy and the social parameters in which many young people are navigating their way in this democracy. Like Ramphele, I suggest that we need to be thinking about young peoples' lives as nuanced productions of social

realities. The relationship to socio-political structures is significantly textured and dealing with the politics of being an adolescent continues even in, and necessarily, in times of poverty and hardship. However, conceptualizing hope as the main strategy in making meanings of young peoples' lives in South Africa, does not do justice to the vibrancy and vulnerabilities of youth cultures, and the concentration on poverty (while an essential orientation for the analysis of contemporary South African democracy) does not complete the frameworks through which it is critical to understand the dilemmas of South African youth. Imaging spaces for the articulation of young women's lived experiences, across under-research zones, is central to my project. Both within poor communities, and within wealthier contexts, young women are mapping their own trajectories for negotiating multiple identities (Wilson, Sengupta, Evans, 2005) and the ways in which this is happening speaks to the complexity of the 'post-Apartheid moment' that we are in. Through a focus on middle class young black women, I intend to document a slice of embodied political performativity, constructed through the discursive formation of multiple subjectivities, raced and classed in a way which can highlight the particular historicity of these young women's experiences.

In some ways, I have undertaken a project with little literary guidance to draw on for framing the kinds of knowledge that I am interested in. This can have its rewards as I have some degree of autonomy in formulating a theoretical trajectory. It also has its pitfalls as I have cautiously navigated the way through a road paved with many gaps, contradictions, and layers. The task of mapping my own thoughts has its own particular hazards. In light of this, I attempted to rise to the challenge and do so with the humility



and recognition that for every ‘uncovering’ I will discover more ground which demands questions, reformulation, and new theorization.

This dissertation has been divided into nine chapters. Each chapter covering relevant theoretical material that will accumulatively present my research and findings. I have divided the methodology into two sections. The first part of the methodology covers my methodological and epistemological framework as it directs the thinking process in this project. Methodology II details the actual methods employed throughout the research process. This section also includes some of the difficulties experienced when conducting the research. Methodology II is followed by the literature review. In this chapter, I map out the major theoretical trajectories governing the analysis of the research. This chapter includes the feminist literature on bodily performances, constructions of beauty as they relate to race and class positioning. Literature on hairstyling as a practice informed by social, cultural and political arenas and sexuality as it is constructed through representations of race are discussed. The first chapter analyzing the data I gathered is chapter five, ‘Dominant notions of the Aesthetics of Beauty’. This chapter details the various hairstyling methods used by the participants. I outline and discuss the dominant notions of beauty amongst the participants and how these notions operate in producing a discourse about beauty. The next chapter is entitled, ‘Performing Black Femininity’. The aim of this chapter is use the notions of beauty as a lens in examining how young black women perform their femininity. This chapter discusses notions of ‘the feminine’, particularly as they have been influenced by the participants’ maternal figures. The chapter also covers various meanings of black female respectability and how the

participants negotiate these meanings as young women located within dynamic youth cultures. The next chapter is entitled, 'Negotiating the Meanings of Blackness'. This chapter is intended to illuminate the complex and contested reality of making meaning of an identity, blackness, as it is being redefined in post-Apartheid South Africa. This chapter provides the socio-political context in which the politics of hair, as it is racialized and classed, is negotiated amongst the participants. Chapter eight, 'Popular Culture and Globalization', illustrates how young and modern female identities are taking shape amidst a growing popular culture. The participants have been greatly influenced by fashion icons, musicians, and models, in their own constructions of beauty and as such I wanted to explore how these influences have produced particular subjectivities in a South African context. This chapter is followed by the concluding remarks, reviewing the main arguments of this dissertation as well as providing possible areas for further research.

## CHAPTER 2

### Methodology I

This chapter will describe the methodological and epistemological choices I have made in theorizing this research project. This chapter examines the political processes involved in doing research in an African context. I have also included a discussion on my own positionality as I theorize the importance of locating myself within this research. This chapter is followed by 'Methodology II', which provides a detailed explanation of the methods used in collecting material for this research. I also return to the politics of research as they are re-examined in relation to the methods chosen.

In theorizing the methodological standpoint of my research I chose to use feminist epistemology and methodology. Epistemology concerns the ways in which knowledge is produced, who produces that knowledge and how. Marjorie Mbilinyi defines epistemology as “concerning different theories about knowledge, and specifically about how knowledge is produced, distributed and consumed” (Mbilinyi, 1992: 32). Feminist epistemology attempts at creating theories of knowledge that locate women as producers and custodians of knowledge.

Uma Narayan, in *The Projects of Feminist Epistemology: Perspectives from a Non-Western Feminist* suggests that men have and continue to dominate knowledge production and that feminist epistemology is concerned with transforming this dynamic.

“Feminist epistemology is a particular manifestation of the general insight that the nature of women’s experiences as individuals and as social beings, our contributions to work, culture, knowledge and our history and political interests have been systematically ignored or misrepresented by mainstream discourses in different areas” (Narayan, 1989:256).

This description of feminist epistemology speaks to the point that women’s lives and experiences have historically not been considered a significant part of knowledge production. What does it mean for the production of knowledge to exclude women? The magnitude of this exclusion is overwhelming. The ways in which we have come to understand and know major discourses is then skewed and not reflective of peoples’ lived realities as a whole.

Sandra Harding provides her own reflections on epistemology, similar to those of Narayan, “feminists have argued that traditional epistemologies, whether intentionally or unintentionally, systematically exclude the possibility that women could be ‘knowers’ or agents of knowledge” (Harding, 1987:3). It is this traditional production of knowledge that diverse feminists across several contexts, have challenged, aiming to reinscribe into new theories of knowledge into canonical (often positivist) frameworks of science and social science. I engage in feminist epistemology at various levels in my research. I am interrogating the practice of research and knowledge production throughout this project. I raise questions about what it means to be a ‘knower’ both as a participant and as a researcher. I have shared subjectivities with my participants, as being a young black woman doing research on other young black women. This raises issues about my own

embeddedness in the research as well as opening the space to do work in which I am politically and emotionally invested. The meanings of inhabiting a body traditionally located as a subject of research while simultaneously engaging in research aimed at reinscribing those subjects, creates multiple positions for myself. I am faced with the challenge of producing work that will be theoretically and materially sound while honouring the subjects of my research. I am engaging in the important and challenging task of producing knowledge that will “speak for” those who have previously been silenced while looking critically at my own voicing of a theoretical and epistemological stand.

At the heart of feminist theorization are questions concerning the ways in which gender is defined, understood, deconstructed and hopefully (within diverse contexts) transformed. I begin with using a definition of gender to clarify its theoretical meaning for unpacking methodological concerns. Imam offers the following definitions for gender as, “ the social organization of sexual difference” and “gender is the knowledge that establishes meanings for bodily differences” (Scott, 1988:2, quoted by Imam, 1997:3). Gendered constructions of meanings for the body are then socially and historically situated. They are neither fixed in time nor space but meticulously negotiated through intensive social, cultural and political relations. To clarify the term culture, I make use of Patricia McFadden’s use of the word.

“I will speak to culture as a ‘re-invented’ and heavily contested phenomenon and terrain, especially in relation to issues of identity,

belonging and authenticity in the context of Africa (as a broad geo-political and historical space) and in particular reference to the struggles of African women for rights and new statuses in Southern Africa as it becomes ‘post-colonial’”. (McFadden, 2000:58).

This definition of culture has relevance for reading gender as situated in cultural contexts that are constantly shifting and as such in a state of motion and ‘re-invention’. I use this definition to expand my own thinking of culture in an African context as something that is in the process of change and engaging struggles faced by women.

Working with a definition of gender, I return to issues of methodology, concerning the understanding of gender in the process of knowledge production.

“A methodology is a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed; it includes accounts of how ‘the general structure of theory’ finds its application in particular scientific disciplines” (Harding, 1987:3).

I define feminist methodology as that which is concerned with transforming dominant notions of gender, by placing the subaltern knowledges of those displaced by gender hierarchies (often “women”), at the focal point of the research as knowledge producers in and of themselves.

As a feminist researcher I am concerned with particular theoretical constructions of gendered identities, such as the work of Mama, Imam and Sow. I am also interested in the ways in which these theories take shape in lived realities to produce and reproduce

knowledge of personhood and subjectivities. Amina Mama's work on subjectivities spells out a theoretical trajectory for looking at subjectivities as constructed. Mama's book *Beyond the Masks: Race, Gender and Subjectivity*, she looks critically at the meanings of subjectivities and their implications when embodied in subjects historically disenfranchised. I draw on Mama's work as providing theoretical tools upon which to begin the analysis of my work. Although she deals intensively with psychoanalytic approaches to subjectivity, which is not my focus, I have found her theorizing on the subjectivities of black women in Britain as useful. She provides an explanatory description of subjectivity that captures many of the intricacies that emerge in my research. "... I develop and apply a theorization of subjectivity that does not assume a unitary, static subject at its core but instead conceptualizes subjectivities as multiple, dynamic and continuously produced in the course of social relations that are themselves changing and at times contradictory." (Mama, 1995: 2). This description of subjectivity proves useful in my research, as the subjects of my research inhabit several subjectivities that are constantly evolving and balancing. I have chosen to name these subjects as young black middle class women, yet these identities are fluid and as will be shown, often times involve contradictory relations to self, relationship, space and context. It is in the contradictions that the intersections of race, class and gender become volatile and illustrative of what I have termed the current "post-Apartheid moment".

I take the stand that 'knowledge is situated' (Mama, 1995:65), as will become evident in my methodological trajectory. The situatedness of this knowledge gives rise to new ways

of knowing emerging from the lives of women that have been historically and politically silenced, particularly in a South African context.

“Studies of and with black women are likely to generate material that has implications for the ways in which both race and gender have been theorized and for social theory in general just as studies of other hitherto unconsidered groups have been done.” (Mama, 1995: 66).

Because so much research and writing on black South African women has concentrated on women who are poor, rurally-based and marginal to formalized political power, it is my aim to do research on a selection of the population that has been severely under researched: the young middle class black women of South African urban space. Doing research on previously and to some extent, currently oppressed people does not in itself challenge dominant productions of knowledge. Mama makes this claim in her writing and suggests alternatives as challenging dominant ways of knowing. I am interested in one of the suggested alternatives as it is reflective of some of the choices I have made in creating and producing this work.

“The second alternative is to conduct within-group research in which researchers research members of their own social group, or people of similar status as a way of rectifying the constant reproduction of the status quo within knowledge production. My choice of black women of similar background and age to myself places it within this option. It reflects my commitment to generating knowledge out of more egalitarian power relations between researcher and researched.” (Mama, 1995:67).



I share in this commitment because taking a position of researching “from within” offers both opportunities and raises its own interesting discursive and political questions. Identified as a ‘young middle class black South African woman’, I already “exist” within the discourses in which these women are engaged and as such have access to embedded pocket of information about “cultural norms”, “the way things are done”, “the right body”, “a successful woman”, “feminine beauty” and so on. Simultaneously however, the embedded nature of my experience at times has blinded me to the political processes that produce and reproduce this information. When reflecting on the research process, I realized, upon scrutinizing the material, that my own embedded understanding of a particular context, sometimes resulted in skipping over critical points. My position as researcher has also opened spaces to reflect critically on the lives of the women I interact with as researcher and to self-reflect on the politics of being young, black and part of a growing elite. It is in these contradictions that the process of doing research becomes a balancing act. There have been moments of gained and restricted vision whose impact I have attempted to counteract by using self-reflexivity as an analytical tool. The self-reflection on positionality component of my research has become an important methodological layer working to maintain the ‘feminist objectivity’ (Bhavnani, 1994) of the research.

Being an African woman doing research in South Africa further places me as both insider and outsider in the research space. I am insider to the degree that my participants and I share a political and geographical history. I am also insider to the geographical space that I am working in, post-Apartheid South Africa. Yet I also inhabit an outsider position on

various levels. As I will explain in the section on positionality, I locate myself as African, but have traversed the globe and have multiple 'home' locations, namely England and United States.

### African Feminist Theory

I locate much of my research within an African feminist theoretical trajectory (Mama 1995; Sow 1997; Imam 1997), yet in doing so I recognize the many influences that this body of work has drawn from and continues to contribute to. In mapping this body of thought, it is important to consider a reading of African feminism as a growing body of work as opposed to a fixed delineated body of theory. Though African feminism as a collection of 'theories' is rigorous and heavily constituted in lived realities, it is comprised of research and practice spread from across the globe. In this, I align myself with Braidotti's understanding of feminism.

“...Feminism is neither a concept, nor a theory, nor even a systematic set of utterances about women. It is, rather, the means chosen by certain women to situate themselves in reality so as to redesign their 'feminine' condition. It would be dangerous to propose a purely theoretical representation of this multiple, heterogeneous complex of women's struggles. I think that the best possible way of reading feminist thought today is by drawing a map rather than an attempt to classify.” (Braidotti, 1991:147).

This definition of feminism is methodologically pertinent as it asserts a reading of feminism as a 'map'. The ways in which I have constructed my thoughts on the research have occurred as mapping out various trajectories of thought, accumulatively displaying the intricate relationship between knowledge production and lived realities.

The combination of the argument that feminist "drawing of maps" (Braidotti, 1991) are valuable and my concerns with self-reflexivity and the insider/outsider complexities of myself as researcher led me to an interest in Kum-Kum Bhavnani's article, "Tracing the Contours: Feminist Research and Feminist Objectivity" in *The Dynamics of "Race" and Gender: Some Feminist Interventions*, 1994. The title, 'Feminist Objectivity', at first appeared to be an oxymoron. Surely the term objectivity alludes to being without particular position or preference. Yet after some contemplation, it seemed an apt description for the kind of research I was interested in conducting. Bhavnani describes the term as referring to "situated knowledge" (Bhavnani, 1994:28). This knowledge being something that is guided by feminist concerns and analysis. Bhavnani draws on the work of Donna Haraway in defining and elaborating on the ideas of feminist objectivity. "Situated knowledge" means knowledge that is specifically placed and has a context from which it is produced. Bhavnani refers to three guiding principles that shape feminist knowledge production and how the relationship between them produces particular kinds of knowledge. The first principal is derived from the notion of accountability. Accountability refers to the idea that the production of knowledge has particular interests and investments. Presuming that feminist work is concerned with gender relations that

aim to recognize women's systematic oppression, when doing feminist research one needs to challenge the re-inscription of hegemonic narratives. This involves research that does not essentialize women and is able to reflect women's varying agencies and experiences in social relations. (Bhavnani, 29:1994). I have an accountability to the participants, to make use of their contribution to produce work that aims at providing a counter narrative to hegemonic discourses.

The second principle relates to positionality. Positionality refers to the idea that everyone conducts research from the context and position in which they are located. In considering positionality, one "makes reference to the micro political processes which are in play during the conduct of research" (Bhavnani, 30:1994). In conducting research, the researcher's positionality can create a political process in which that positionality is negotiated and reconstructed. As already explored, I am particularly aware of my own positionality as insider/outsider, and as constructed within the same discourses of race, class, and gender, which envelop my interviewees, and thus this principle has grounded my methodological orientation.

The last principle refers to nuances of difference in the research, this being how difference is understood and negotiated throughout the research process. Partiality is the notion that all knowledge is partial and therefore not complete. Presumably it is not possible to produce knowledge that is complete on any topic, as there is always the possibility for creating new knowledge given the differences that exist between us. (Bhavnani, 1994:30). I by no means claim that the work I do accounts for all the work to

be done on researching and understanding gendered subjectivities as they relate to constructions of beauty. My work is partial and guided by specific principles. This research will speak to 'nuances of difference' and hopefully present differences as ways of expanding what is known on the lives of women.

In summary, research as an intellectual and academic tool has been widely discussed by both African and Western feminists, I contend however, that despite the wealth of theorization on "feminist research methodologies", "gender analysis", "positionality" and so on, that the actual reality of doing the research presents itself as very theoretically demanding endeavour, for which one is not always prepared by methodological preparation. Being in the 'field' is a visceral process for which I do not believe any amount of reading can prepare one. A researcher can mentally prepare him-or herself for entering the field, but upon entrance, the mental process that transforms itself into an embodiment of social political realities can be powerfully overwhelming.

This research project has been a particularly political process for me on a number of levels. I had initially intended on doing a comparative exploratory study on the commodification of beauty as young black working class and middle class women experience it. I was hoping to surface the tensions between race, class and gender by doing a comparative study of these two groups of women. I had conducted research in Langa for my Honours degree and thought to continue using this space as a site of research, due to some familiarity with the space. When I initiated planning for this, I encountered several challenges in terms of locating participants in Langa. I did not have

any immediate connections to people living in Langa and such could not go through colleagues or friends to source participants. A fellow researcher, Gugu McLaren, and I decided to return to one of the locations we had done research in our Honours year, and speak to a woman with whom we had had a brief encounter in order to explore our options as young Masters level researchers. A woman named \*Thandeka\*, was working and living at an establishment called Quoboquobo. We asked her if she would be interested in participating in our research projects and if she knew of anyone else who might be willing to assist us. She agreed to meet with us and do the research. We then set up another meeting with her to begin the process and meet the other women. We eventually met the women at a café in the city centre. The first collective interview was run at this café with four women, which presented its own specific challenges of namely noise and privacy. We agreed we would work with this group of women and proceed along the research journey.

From this point onwards, however, it became increasingly difficult to manage the difficulties of time (making and keeping arrangements), space (finding appropriate locations in which to listen to women based in poor township areas, in crowded and noisy houses and social setting), and the deadlines required by my research commitment. After intensive discussion and internal debate about the framework of my research, I reframed my research question to concentrate on middle class women with whom issues of access and communication were (to me, as a middle class woman) easier. This experience allowed me to consider more carefully the choices I make about research topics as they are affected by methodological realities. I had not explicitly thought through issues of

negotiating space and time, and how my own assumptions about peoples 'available' time, would conflict to lived reality.

As positionality has played a large role in conceiving the methodological component of my research I continue to feel it is important to discuss how this positionality has performed itself in the research. I quote Rosi Braidotti in positing the importance of unearthing and analyzing my own positionality.

“...I as a feminist who is writing this text cannot dissociate the genealogical account from a sort of narrative of my own theoretical and political origins as a feminist: the personal is not only political, it is also the basis for the theoretical.” (Braidotti, 1991:147)

In order to concretize issues of positionality beyond the broad tropes of insider/outsider and the discursive location previously mentioned, I shall briefly describe how I am located socially, politically, economically and geographically. All of these have served to create and limit the scope of my interaction in the research process and hence the kinds of material I gathered.

I am a Zambian born young black middle class woman, having been raised in England, New York, Botswana, and South Africa. My family is Zambian and hence my ancestral roots are firmly planted in a Zambian context. I have never lived in Zambia and have been raised in the various locations mentioned, with South Africa being the place I have

spent most of my time. As already mentioned, my geographical histories place me instantly as an outsider to a South African context yet lodged comfortably within a South African sense of identity. Having attended High School and lived in South Africa for a number of years I have developed a sense of 'home' in South Africa. I identify as Zambian as that has been a constant location of 'home' throughout my childhood. As I have traveled across various spaces, as a means of retaining a sense of identity, I have chosen to identify as Zambian. As foreigner to my 'home', having not lived there, I exist outside of its borders but feel a desperate need to claim it as base from which I originate.

Being a young black middle class woman has afforded me the currency with which to communicate both intellectually and socially with the young women I am researching. As young black middle class women comprise the category of women I have chosen to research, being a part of that categorization allows me to access inconspicuous negotiations of this subject position in South Africa. I am also aware that this position can serve to restrict me from acknowledging the social production of identity that occurs within a space one is overly familiar with. I have had to negotiate the benefits and limitations of being a member of the research group by virtue of racial, economic and social allegiances.

In reflecting on my positionality in the research process I realized the importance for deconstructing and evaluating my own experiences of the intersection of race, class and gender in South Africa. Being black in South Africa is an experience textured powerfully by both my gender and middle class locality. The ways in which these three components



of my identity have coalesced into existence forms much of my initial interest into this research topic.

I came to South Africa in 1996, a pivotal time in South Africa's political history. Democracy had recently been established and life for black South African's was envisioned as taking new dynamic shapes. I had just moved from Botswana, a context with its own political and historical configurations concerning black identity and perhaps more so African identity. I was the daughter of a diplomat and thus intellectually placed in a position of status and prestige. This position transferred itself into a South African space but with particular local conflicts that took the form of class struggles. Being in South Africa as a black middle class girl presented itself as an identity layered with conflict and hope. I experienced much antagonism around being black and middle class. I also had feelings of hope, as new political and economic opportunities for black people were "opening up" around the country. This was the first time my racial identity had been brought starkly to the foreground of my identity. The various places I had lived were characterized by their own unique identity conflicts. Being Zambian in the United States called for a reclaiming of my African identity as I was raised in a home very much rooted in 'African' ideals but socialized in an American sense of reality. Being black yet foreign and middle class in Botswana called for the reclaiming of my 'African-ness' in a space where it was consistently challenged. I was a young girl with an American accent claiming to be African but having never lived in an African country. In South Africa my history of claiming an identity transformed to fit a context where the intersection of blackness and class were being challenged. I was foreign in all senses of the word, a

Zambian with an American accent projecting a lifestyle associated with middle class sensibilities. I experienced a sense of having to prove my blackness amongst black people while also having to prove my middle 'classness' amongst white people. Unfortunately both tasks involved prosaic and stereotypical constructions of position. Proving blackness meant listening to 'black music', i.e. black musicians. It meant socializing with black people and perhaps most importantly it necessitated having an awareness of race that resulted in resentment for whiteness. Proving a class position involved flaunting knowledge on foreign countries, owning brand clothing, inconspicuously alluding to the number of bedrooms your house had as a signifier of wealth. Both groups of people placed me as an anomaly, threatening the existence of strong historical and political experiences in South Africa.

It is through this negotiation, peppered with a growing desire to understand my own internal conflicts, that led me to examine one of the major themes of my research, namely, the reconceptualisation of blackness in post-Apartheid South Africa. This theme arose in nearly all of my focus groups as the young women presented their struggles and understandings of the meanings of blackness in contemporary South Africa. This is a conversation that I have been engaging in over the past decade- looking critically at what it means to be black or African in South Africa today, specifically at what it means to be black in a context where racial identification has a long and fraught political, social and economic history. Working with young women located as part of a black elite has surfaced this topic repeatedly. My research suggests that the concept of blackness is being redefined in South Africa with the emergence of a black elite. The historical and

political legacy that was designed to ensure sustained poverty amongst people of colour still reigns clear and intermittently for millions of people in South Africa. Yet amidst this there is a small but present growing elite group of black people whose realities are comfortably lodged in middle class lifestyles. The emergence of this elite group has called for what I term a reconceptualisation of blackness. Particularly so, as we are moving into an era where economic position and political allegiance are less determining factors in the meanings of being black. With shifting meanings come new understandings of the notion of blackness. Yet the space of reconceptualisation often produces essentialist notions of identity as a means of preserving solidarity amidst a reconstructing shift in meanings of blackness.

This chapter has covered my methodological positioning as well as examining the epistemological framework. I discussed the African feminist literature that has allowed me to think through my research as embedded within this body of thought. I have also presented the various ways my positionality has influenced the research both theoretically and practically. The next chapter analyzes some of the practical components to the research conducted. I will explain the research methods I chose to employ as well as revisiting some of the challenges involved in doing practical research.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology II: Research in Practice

I will be discussing the research methods used in gathering information and explaining why I chose these methods. I will also provide a brief introduction into who the research participants are and where they are located. This chapter will also cover some of the material gathered during participant observations and discuss how it shaped the methodological framing of the research. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the challenges experienced in conducting research in relation to the methods employed.

#### What Methods?

I have chosen to employ qualitative research methods, namely participant observation and collective interviews that I refer to as focus groups. I thought this the most effective method for gathering the kinds of in-depth information I am interested in.

“Qualitative inquiry is especially powerful as a source of *grounded theory*, theory that is inductively generated from fieldwork, that is, theory emerges from the researcher’s observations and interviews out in the real world rather than in the laboratory or the academy.” (Patton, 2002:11).

Participant observation provides key sites for understanding and experiencing the lives of my participants. I intended on partaking in participant observation as a way of building a relationship with the participants, while observing the various ways they spend their leisure time. By participating in their ‘common’ activities, I thought it would provide better insight into the ways in which issues of femininity, race and class configure in

affecting their lives. There are several advantages to using participant observation, some of which are explained in *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods* by Michael Quinn Patton. I will be discussing a select few of these advantages. The first of which being, that “direct observations”, allow the research a better understanding of the context in which they are working (Patton, 2002:262). Secondly, “firsthand experience with a setting and the people in the setting” provides the researcher with a ‘primary’ set of information with which to analyze and evaluate as opposed to secondary information derived from ‘report’ (Patton, 2002:262). Thirdly, one is able to ‘see’ things that may have gone unnoticed by the participants and also recognize information directly related to the research topic (Patton, 2002:262). Lastly, by partaking in participant observation, the researcher is able to “draw on personal knowledge during the formal interpretation stage of analysis.” (Patton, 2002: 264). One of the major areas of observation I conducted involved accompanying the participants to Hair Salons, and being present when they were ‘doing each other’s hair’ in their homes. I also conducted participant observation while they were engaged in socializing and nightlife activities. This section of the participant observation was aimed at helping me think through how to address the topics I wanted to cover in the focus groups. By observing the participants I hoped to gain a more nuanced understanding of their lives and the ways in which beauty practices and negotiations of femininity occurred in their lives.

The focus groups were structured with people with whom I already had strong relationships and I believe that this would produce collaborative and detailed information. I am working with a definition of a focus group as “an interview with a small group of

people on a specific topic. Groups are typically 6 to 10 people with similar backgrounds who participate in the interview for one to two hours. In a given study, a series of different focus groups will be conducted to get a variety of perspectives and increase confidence in whatever patterns emerge.” (Patton, 2002:385). Although, my focus groups were slightly smaller and included four to five people, I chose these collective interviews as opposed to individual interviews as I thought the participants would be more comfortable speaking ‘freely’ amongst themselves (while I recorded the conversation) than direct/individual conversation with me. I also considered this method as allowing me more freedom to direct questions in line with the flow of conversation, and thus focusing on discussion most relevant to my research topic.

“The conversational interview offers maximum flexibility to pursue information in whatever direction appears to be appropriate, depending on what emerges from observing a particular setting or from talking with one or more individuals in that setting.” (Patton, 2002:342).

### Who are the Women?: Locating the participants

At the beginning of my fieldwork I was unsure of how best to locate groups of women that would be interested in being a part of my research. I began by considering how to locate a group of young black middle class women. I define the participants as young, black and middle class women, categorizations that I have chosen as relevant, and within which I was willing to ‘place’ the women I needed to hear. It was my intention to work

with women who define themselves in this class bracket and therefore have what I assume to be certain opportunities, access points, resources, and experiences in their lives.

Through various conversations with colleagues and peers, I was offered names of a group of women that might be interested in participating in this research. I contacted these women and arranged a meeting. Through initial conversations with this group of women they all seemed eager and enthusiastic to participate in the research. The group consisted of five young women, all aged twenty-one, four of whom are studying Medicine at the University of Cape Town. One of the participants is in her final year of her Marketing major in a Bachelor of Business Science, at the University of Cape Town. I began by engaging in participant observation and then conducted a series of focus groups.

The women's names for the purpose of this report are Erykah, Amani, Thato, Mandisa and Michaela. Erykah is from Nigeria and has lived in England, Kenya and now resides in South Africa. Amani is South African from the North-West Province and lives in Vereenging, South Africa. Thato was born in Soweto and moved into the northern suburbs of Johannesburg at a young age, where she currently resides. Mandisa grew up in Durban and moved to Johannesburg where she currently resides. Michaela is from Uganda, born in South Africa, where she has grown up. She currently resides in Rustenburg. All the women study at the University of Cape Town as mentioned, but return to their family homes as their main place of inhabitation.

### Participant Observation

I engaged in participant observation of various events with the participants. I chose particular events, as mentioned earlier, both of which I used as resource in designing questions for the focus groups. 'Hanging-out' with the women during their nightlife activities enabled me to gain a clearer view of how they negotiate their notions of beauty as they relate to performing femininities. I used the information gathered to think through which questions to emphasize and discuss. By spending time with them 'out on the town', I was able to see and experience how bodily performances took place. With this 'knowledge' I proceeded to focus on themes relating to the material I observed and that, which was absent. How these themes translated into questions will become clearer in the analysis of the material gathered in the chapters to follow. Going to Hair Salons with the participants provided actual material with which to analyze, in conceiving of the chapters of the dissertation, as well as, information related to which aspects of hairstyling and grooming I could address in the focus groups.

Once I felt secure about working with this group of women, I began engaging in participant observation of the social interactions and experiences with which the women are familiar, and through which I believe it would be possible for me to begin understanding the lived realities of their embodied performances as 'young', 'black', 'women' within an urban and well-resourced environment. I planned a night out with my research participants to get an idea of how they socialize and what they do in their spare time. I present a micro-profile of what I encountered in order to address the ways in which I chose to continue developing my relationship with the women, as researcher and



as 'insider'. The following descriptions are reliant on memory alone, and therefore offer selective moments through which I was able to reflect on the methodological implications of working within the practice of 'embodied femininity' at the same time as I was developing relationships with my research participants. The event I draw upon was a 'pilot' participant observation and as such was used to inform the research content. The plan was to go out to Planet Bar (a up market, chic Bar in Cape Town city centre) at the Mount Nelson Hotel. I was a little apprehensive about how I was supposed to dress. I had heard about the place and knew it was quite 'posh' so knew I had to dress appropriately.

I met the women at Planet bar. The bar is located inside the Mount Nelson overlooking the terrace. Thato, Amani and Erykah were there but Michaela was not. Planet Bar is designed as a lounge suite, with a bar at the far end of the venue with couches and chairs filling up the rest of the space. The drinks menu offers a range of cocktails and champagne. The cocktails are priced between about R25 and R45. We had about 3 rounds of drinks. The women ordered various interesting and colourful cocktails. I had two drinks and began to question the ethics of drinking and doing research. Erykah's boyfriend was at Chilli on Long, a club on Long Street, so we decided to go there after Planet Bar. Chilli on Long was having a hip-hop and R&B party. All the women drove with Amani and I met them at Chilli on Long. Once we arrived there, we paid a R30 entrance fee and went in. The club was fairly full but not crowded. There were some live performances followed by music played by the DJ's. I thought it best that I cut down on the drinking if I still intended on doing participant observation, although intention and social obligation came to a crossroads as the girls bought another round of drinks and

bought one for me. We all drank various ciders, Savannah's and Spin. We danced for a while and then I bought everyone a round of drinks as I thought it only polite to reciprocate the gesture. Erykah's boyfriend was there and so she spent time with him. The women then had 2 rounds of tequila, (I had only one) and I saw a few people I knew and spoke to them for a while. After being there for about an hour or so we decided to leave.

Reflecting on the evening the next day, a few things came to mind. First and foremost, were the ethics around researching and drinking, but also questions concerning the development and maintenance of "social obligations" when involved in participant observation, concerned me. Secondly, I reflected over the meanings of doing research in and around similar social circles. How would similar environments hinder or aid the ways in which I read and interacted with the women in these environments? I also considered more closely the process of selecting information to use from participant observation, how would I make this selection?

In reflecting upon my first concern, it seemed to me that social drinking with the women had seemed the 'natural' thing to do, but after my first drink I really began to question how thorough my perceptions could be while I was under the influence of alcohol. At the same time, I in fact wanted to have a drink and thought it might be strange to not drink the whole night if perhaps that were something I would have ordinarily done. I suppose I drew my own boundaries by not getting 'drunk' but drinking enough to 'fit in'.

Participant observation as a method has always been a contested form of research for me. Partaking in an event with participants for the sake of research has been an awkward experience for me. The notion of observing the 'other' in their natural environment springs to mind and has made me feel very uncomfortable. I do recognize the importance of it, particularly in gaining a textured knowledge of what people do and how they choose to spend their time. As such I swallowed my reservations and went out with the women. This brings me to the second point. I distinctly remember thinking how the notion of gender and race become highly differentiated when class is thrown into the picture. These women are young and vibrant and are able to access a lifestyle that the majority of South Africans cannot. They drove to Planet Bar, paid for their own drinks, demonstrated choice and freedom over their lives in a way that made me think critically about what opportunities can provide. Alongside access to this lifestyle, my impression was that they had a very real sense of themselves and have great respect for their families and each other. They also seemed to have a sense and value of being self-sufficient and the importance of being able to make their own choices. I think it is this notion of choice that interested me most. Whereas for many choice is a luxury, it seemed to be a way of life for these women and I became interested in how this could translate into choices about their performance of beauty. How was the notion of choice negotiated in performing femininity and to what degree is this, in fact, a freedom of choice when embedded in a hegemonic discourse of beauty and femininity.

Finally my experience of participant observation in this limited encounter led me to turn to the practicalities of doing research within a social class and thus social environment

that is similar between the research participants and myself. I had glimpses of how the merging lines between my everyday life and the work I do could begin to blur. I met people that I knew at Chilli on Long and explaining that I was doing research on gendered subjectivities felt like juxtaposing different self-identities in a way that was not entirely comfortable. It was this meeting along with other instances that evening that brought my attention to finer details engrained in researching a space that is very familiar. Without discarding the experience of being with these four unique individuals the things that we did could have closely resembled my own interactions with other friends. So I was once more reminded of the fact that the research would become rather self-reflective, in the sense that I was using the lens of 'researcher' to understand and provide commentary on aspects of my own life. The power imbalances between researcher and researched, so often cited by feminist theorists (Narayan, 1989; Oakley, 1981) took on a unique set of questions in that the participants were in fact the ones with the 'power' as I was an observer in their environment. I was also a participant of the same environment which bought me currency to understand things unsaid but also blinded me to the unsaid as these exist in the very fabric of my own life.

In order to develop the terrain of my research interests, I chose to engage in more participation observation of the participants' experience, so that I could develop a better methodological understanding of how to listen to their negotiation of 'hair politics'. I drew on the learnings of the "Girls Night Out" at the Planet Bar to prepare myself for the challenges to my own identity and assumptions I might encounter and went with one of the participants to the hairdresser. Michaela was getting her hair braided at Braid

Excellence (predominantly black hair salon in Cape Town) in Mowbray. It is a small salon along one of the side roads off the Main road in Mowbray. The salon seems to cater for a variety of hairstyles for black women, Relaxing, Cornrowing, Braiding, Cutting (See Appendix).

The process of working with hair began before getting to the hair salon, Michaela took her cornrows out by herself at home, then washed her hair at home. Her sister's friend suggested this salon, as she said it would be 'cheap' R80 to cornrow with your own hair. Via this word of mouth, Michaela decided to go to the salon. She bought her own hairpiece at a store in Golden Acre (taxi rank in city centre) called Jabula. The hairpiece cost R100.

The cost of braiding would be R280 to braid her hair provided she brought her own hair. It would have cost her R350 had she bought hair from the Salon. The hairpiece she used is a mix of dark brown and black. It is curly. It is meant to be plaited half way or a quarter way and then the rest is left undone. She had used this hairpiece before and so thought she would do so again. In addition she had a formal dance to attend the next week and wanted to do her hair for that event.

We waited for about 10/15 minutes for the woman who was supposed to be doing Michaela's hair to finish with the customer she was with in order to attend to us. During this time I ask Michaela several questions about the process of getting her hair braided. She said that it should take about 4/5 hours to finish. She usually keeps her braids in for

5/6 weeks, even though she would like to keep them in for longer considering how much they cost. She said that the average price for braids in Mowbray is R350. She also said that she would prefer it if she could get someone to braid her hair at home, as it would probably cost less.

So, I left her at the salon and returned later once they had begun doing her hair. Once again, it was an interesting experience. I had had grand expectations of constant writing and photo taking, which is not what resulted. I found myself standing around wondering what I should be observing and asking. I remember the salon being extremely small, about the size of a bedroom, barely fit to accommodate a single bed and side table. I also recall people looking at me strangely and questioning why I was asking so many questions about hair and writing down the answers. I felt particularly awkward as I thought they would be wondering why I was asking questions about doing black hair as surely I should know that information as a black woman. This may have just been a projection of my own insecurities about the gaps in my knowledge on how to do black hair.

I participated in another expedition to the hair salon with Thato. I met the participants at Devon Place (their place of residence) where they were preparing to go to a formal that evening. In preparation, Thato wanted to tidy up her weave. I arrived at Devon Place and “hung out” with the women for a while. Michaela, Thato and Amani were there, “hanging out” and drinking. I was offered a drink (the ethics of drinking and researching present themselves again), which I enthusiastically accepted.

After a while Thato and I left for the hair salon. We went to Monix, which is a hair salon in Observatory, down the road from where they live, which is the primary reason Thato frequents this hair salon. At Monix, Thato wanted to wash and blow-dry her hair. A wash and blow-dry costs R90 at Monix, which Thato said is rather expensive. As Thato was doing her hair I sat next to her and proceeded in taking a “before” photo to set up a “before and after” one. I intended on using the photos in the dissertation to showcase the different hairstyles worn by the participants. I felt a little awkward taking photos in the salon. I was aware of people looking at me with rather suspicious eyes. Unfortunately I was soon notified by the lady doing Thato’s hair, that I should move and sit in the waiting room, so I asked her why and she said that the ‘owner’ had said that I was not allowed to sit next to Thato while she did her hair. I approached the owner and explained what I was doing and enquired as to what the problem was with me sitting next to Thato. He responded, ‘This is a studio and people need to be free to do hair and you’ll just get in the way. It will be better for you to sit in the waiting room’. The entrance area, referred to as the waiting room was where I had to go. I was offended and felt rather powerless in the situation. After sitting around for a while, I decided to walk back to Devon Place and wait for Thato there.

Back at Devon Place I found Amani washing her hair. She decided to wash and blow-dry her hair at home. She said that the last time she went to Monix they did not blow-dry her hair the way she wanted them to. Her salon of choice is Carlton, (located in Cavendish) but due to time constraints, she thought it best to do it herself. Unfortunately, she cannot blow-dry her hair herself and so asked Michaela’s older sister Chris to do it for her. The

only other person in her group of friends who can do hair is Erykah, and she was unavailable at the time. Chris came over to blow-dry her hair, while Michaela and I had conversation, drinking and watching TV. Chris used Optimum care hair product as she blow-dried Amani's hair. I asked Amani a few questions about blow-drying. She expressed that it was very important to not use large amounts of hair product as that makes her hair oily and sticky, which is undesirable and it gets dirty faster. As I was watching Chris blow-dry Amani's hair, I began to think about homosocial spaces as providing an environment 'to do' hair (this theme will be unpacked as a theoretical concept in the chapters to follow). The notion that black women 'should' have knowledge on how to do hair was very real. Michaela and I did not know how to blow-dry hair with the intent of straightening it and the social capital of this knowledge took a practical form. I was interested to find out where Chris had learnt how to do hair. She said that she had 'picked it up' by watching other people do hair, mainly when she is at the salon and her hair is being done. Amani was adamant that she wanted her hair to be straight so she could style it easily. While I was watching this interaction as a researcher various themes crossed my mind, such as the notion that women have to transform themselves and particularly their hair when engaging in public events and how this reflects the performativity of femininity. As a young woman spending time with other young women preparing to go to a function, this interaction was part and parcel of what one does in preparation. Observing through these different lenses brought to mind how embedded knowledges on black femininity can be and how dominant notions of beauty have become everyday experiences of femininity. The experience of being both insider and



outsider to the research creates a dynamic allowing for greater depth of information but also raising questions about the relationship between research and practice.

I have presented a descriptive analysis of important moments of participant observation that have implicit meanings for the research presented in further chapters. The interactions discussed map the class locality of these women. The intention was to provide some contextuality to their lives such that the participants become real and accessible to the reader.

### Focus Groups

Once the first few sessions of participant observation had been conducted I began thinking about and setting up focus groups. I chose to conduct focus groups as the predominant research method as I felt that they create a conducive dynamic, which can facilitate the depths of engagement in which I was interested. Working collaboratively with a group of people who are already well acquainted allows for rich and in-depth discussion. The participants have personal and intimate knowledge of each other, which allows for disclosure sooner rather than later. The space constructs itself as one of immediate engagement. There is an anticipated negotiation of power that occurs between the participants and myself as researcher. This power dynamic can serve to restrict certain members' contributions to the group, as in any group dynamic, some voices 'speak' louder than others, and this was a process I was willing to engage in. There are advantages and disadvantages to using focus groups as a research method. Some the

advantages discussed in *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* are that “participants tend to provide checks and balances on each other, which weeds out false or extremes views” (Krueger and Casey 2000 in Patton, 2002: 386). Another advantage mentioned, is that “data collection is cost-effective” when using focus groups (Patton, 2002: 386). An advantage, I have encountered through experience is that participants tend to be more comfortable discussing their opinions with people they have established relationships with. I have also experienced a deeper level of reflection in focus groups by the participants, than when interviewing individually. The participants tend to ‘bounce’ ideas off of one another in ways that construct rich and meaningful discussion. Some of the disadvantages I have experienced involve managing the group dynamic. Each participant may not be able to equally share their opinions and ideas. This can lead to certain participants being ‘silenced’. Recording conversation with several people can be a challenging task in terms of audible clarity, particularly when the participants are engaged in captivating discussion. However, through my own practice, I have found that the benefits of focus groups outweigh the costs incurred.

Overall, I conducted six focus groups. At the beginning of this process I had not imagined the extent to which these focus groups would take shape as a collaborative ‘work in process’. The women engaged critically and intimately with themselves and myself throughout the process allowing for an on-going self-reflective analysis. I did not set a limit to the number of focus groups I would run, but rather approached each using thematic constructs. Each focus group built on the one before in momentum, in depth and

in thematic focus. I chose themes that pertained to the general research focus and allowed myself to explore various topics under this umbrella.

The focus groups were conducted at both my apartment and two of the participants' home. Five participants were present at two of the focus groups, four participants were available for the remaining four focus groups. All five of the participants were present. The first focus group was intended on gathering information on the different hairstyles participants' have had. This conversation sparked discussion on dominant trends in hairstyling for black women and why these hairstyles are considered favorable. I structured this focus group such that the women would engage with one another about their views and I would ask questions for clarification and more depth. The conversation progressed to issues around hair grooming and the meanings and cultural capital of knowing how to do hair as a young black woman. The last discussion in this focus group was around body adornment and the aesthetics of beauty engulfed in this process.

The second focus group took place at my apartment. Four of the participants were present. I began by asking questions around skin colour as a way of surfacing their opinions on the meanings around skin colour, particularly in black communities. This line of questioning unleashed a discussion on meanings of blackness in contemporary South Africa. The discussion then progressed to the participants' sexual relationships and their notions of success within these relationships and of themselves.

The third focus group was conducted at a shared home between two of the participants in Observatory, Cape Town. This focus group began with clarifying the procedural engagement of hair salons; when they go to hair salons; which hair salons they go to. The next question was around the commodification of beauty products and specifically which skin products they use and why. This progressed into further discussion on the meanings of skin tone amongst black people. This was followed by a brief conversation about beauty tips and the various ways they have been socialized into understandings of the practice of adorning the body. The next conversation veered slightly away from the topic of the aesthetics of beauty. I was interested in knowing how the participants had come to construct their own subjectivities and the experience of growing into young women. I wanted to know about the process of shifting into the “space” of young women and how that had been nurtured and molded in Cape Town. I also wanted to surface knowledge on the dominant influences in forging these gendered subjectivities. A rich and solid discussion transpired through the interactions within the focus group. The focus group concluded with a conversation about magazines in South Africa and the lifestyle conceived by certain magazines and whom they target.

Three of the participants were present at the fourth focus group. My roommate sat in and joined the focus group midway as she was around at the time of the focus group. The first question was aimed at discussing when the participants felt most feminine and what that would entail, thus revealing their understanding of the feminine and also their accessibility to it. The next question involved conversation about different types of styles worn by young women in South Africa.

The fifth focus group began with a discussion on weaves and their importance. The conversation then progressed to the ways hairstyles are classed. I asked them if they identified certain hairstyles as representing rural/urban divides. The bulk of the focus group involved discussing how the participants locate themselves in terms of class. It was a lengthy discussion on the politics of naming and what meanings are associated with being ascribed to a certain class.

The last focus group was intended to sum up some the major points discussed over the year. I began by asking the participants about their family histories, where exactly they had lived and when. I also asked about their parents' professions. We then spoke about how spaces are raced and classed in South Africa this sparked conversation on the meanings of race as it intersects with class in South Africa today. The participants also spoke briefly about the pressures experienced by being first generation, born free, middle class women. They touched on the expectations from their parents and how they conceive these expectations.

### The Politics of Research Revisited

The negotiation of space and time with the participants proved to be a very real and challenging issue during the research process. The meanings of being a young black woman doing gender research came to the forefront on many occasions. One example of such an experience involves an interview I had scheduled with two of the participants in their home. I arrived at their home and found that they were entertaining some relatives. I was initially taken aback as I had not expected there to be anyone present besides myself and the participants. Rather naively, I assumed the time we had allocated would be uninterrupted, yet that is often far from the reality when doing research. I introduced myself to the participants' aunt and uncle. The uncle asked me several questions about my research and the purpose of it. I found myself in a position of having to defend and justify the work I was doing, in a manner that maintained the respect required when addressing an elderly black man. The socialization of my youth kicked into action and required that the respect be maintained. The reality of my multiple identities was actively being negotiated and balanced in a brief encounter. Having been raised in an African home with particular sensibilities and values, I knew that despite any offence I was taking from his questions, respect for one's elders was paramount. At the same time I felt attacked and challenged by his probing questions into the relevance of my research. Being a Gender Studies student, one encounters various forms of questioning, confused gazes, sheer bewilderment at the prospect that Gender could in fact be a mode of analysis, let alone one which produces a Graduate level of study. So, to some degree this line of questioning has become part and parcel to the experience of interacting with people and the exchange of pleasantries involving, 'so what do you do'. I felt most

unprepared for this encounter while in the participant's home. As the uncle continued drilling me about the research, I remember thinking, where in the literature on the process of research is "the Uncle". Where does one find information to prepare oneself for such an encounter? There is a plethora of literature on the politics of doing feminist research, but nowhere have I seen reference to the possibility of "an Uncle".

The connection between my own subjectivities and my role as researcher came to a meeting point that left me both uncomfortable and perturbed. The uncle proceeded to ask me questions about myself, concerning where I was from, what my parents do, where I live. These questions were not unique in and of themselves and elderly people had asked me these questions before. I think that the context in which it occurred challenged the power dynamic that had already been established between the participants and myself. Although the 'power' resided with the participants as the primary bearers of knowledge, we had formulated an understanding that allowed me a certain amount of power and influence in enforcing the boundaries of our interaction. There had been a status position that I had created as a researcher and this was "falling to pieces" by these incessant questions. I felt the balance of power shift dramatically in the few moments I spent with the uncle. I was under his gaze with little room to maneuver.

This line of questioning revealed particular components of my identity, which I knew would raise even more questions. These were the fact that I was not South African and spoke with an 'interesting' accent. The uncle asked me how my parents were able to move to South Africa and how my father got his current job and with this question, I felt

instantly swept off my feet. He was alluding to xenophobic constructions that foreigners, non-South African Africans, should not be placed in positions of structural and political power in the country.

How was it that he could ask these questions and how was it that I had to answer and what did it mean for the greater scheme of knowledge production I had immersed myself in. This is the reality of identity in the research process and I felt ill equipped to do anything to assert agency, which became a fleeting idea lost in practice. You may call it xenophobia or any other term, but the experience was real and gone in the space of a few moments. I returned to my role as researcher jarred and slightly off balance.

This chapter has detailed the research methods utilized in gathering material for this dissertation. I explained the choice of methods used and the various advantages and disadvantages of these methods. I provided a brief description of the participants as a way of introducing them to the research as 'embodied' and 'located' participants. A description of the participant observation engaged in the research was described and reflected upon in the chapter. I discussed how these events shaped my methodological thinking about the topics I was to engage. I gave an outline to the content of the focus groups conducted and attempted at illustrating the progression of each focus group. This chapter concluded with a 'revisiting' of the politics of research as they relate to methodological choices made in the process of gathering material. The literature review is the next chapter, and will cover the major theoretical concepts used to analyze the research, as well as draw connections between the concepts as paving my own theoretical thread.



## CHAPTER 4

### Literature Review

I have made use of select texts that relate to the thematic development of the research material. This is in no way an exhaustive review of the body of literature available on the issues raised. This review is intended to highlight the relevant themes, which broadened my own thinking on the ways for analyzing the politics of hair as it relates to race, class and gender.

In thinking through critical terms such as “gender” and “performance”, I have employed the work of Judith Butler. Butler grounds much of her theorization in phenomenology. I am interested in her work with the concept of gender as performative.

“...Gender is in no way a stable identity of locus of agency from which acts proceed; rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*.”

“...What is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo. In its very character as performative resides the possibility of contesting its reified status.”

(Butler, 1997:402).

It is in the contestation of the performance of gender that I locate many of the questions around the rigidity of gender construction. What spaces are available to rethink and re-perform gendered identities? The notion of gender as performative is crucial to my own constructions of gender as a conceptual tool. In thinking about the ways that the female

body functions in performing and upholding social and political constructions of gender relations, I include another definition of gender. I use De Lauretis' definition of gender, she draws on Foucault (1980), as it relates intimately to the ways in which I conceptualized gender in my own work.

“...Gender is not a property of bodies or something originally existent in human beings, but ‘the set of effects produced in bodies, behaviors, and social relations’...” (De Lauretis, 1987:3)

To understand gender as performance we need to define performativity. Butler does so in her book *Bodies That Matter*.

“...Performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act’, but, rather as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names.” (Butler, 1993:2).

Through these definitions, gender can be understood as a fluid process and performance constituted over time, through the practice of socially and culturally produced ‘acts’. The body as theorized by Butler, with the help of phenomenology, is historically constituted.

“As an intentionally organized materiality, the body is always an embodying of possibilities both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention. In other words, the body is a historical situation, as Beauvoir has claimed, and is a manner of doing, dramatizing and reproducing a historical situation.” (Butler, 1997:404).

This will become increasingly important when thinking about the ways in which contemporary performances of gender have come to be produced. Although I will not be taking a genealogical look at how black women's subjectivities are constructed in South Africa, I will draw on various influential factors in history that have shaped modern meanings of beauty.

To return to conceptualizing the body, I refer to the body as the text upon which gender is performed, culturally, historically and politically in various contexts. The meanings of discourse as an arena in which gender is practiced, becomes particularly important in understanding constructions of subjectivity. Subjectivity, as Amina Mama suggests is constituted through multiple discourses (Mama, 1995). The notion of subjectivity lies at the heart of much of my discussion in this text. Amina Mama provides a definition of discourse and makes critical connections between discourse and subjectivity.

"I define discourses as historically constructed regimes of knowledge. Discourses articulate and convey formal and informal knowledge and ideologies. They are constantly being reproduced and constituted, and can change and evolve in the process of communication. A discourse is a shared grid of knowledge that one or more people can 'enter' and through which explicit and implicit meanings are shared." (Mama, 1995:98).

Mama uses discourse as a tool for locating and understanding subjectivities. She suggests that subjectivities are 'dynamic and multiple' and must be identified within ever changing discourses over time. Discourses are shared and thus co-constituted by those both inside and outside the realm of a particular discourse. The meanings produced within discourses

are continuously being redefined and as such subjectivities are also in constant motion.

“There is no universal subject but only particular subjectivities and subject positions that are located in discourses-and so in the social sphere-in history and in culture. Subjectivity is a process of constitution and movement through already constituted positions.” (Mama, 1995:98)

Therefore gendered subjectivities are performed through discourses established over time and fluid through time. Subjectivities are created in relation to hegemonic discourses and ‘subaltern’ discourses and as such exist not as fixed but as relationally constituted. Historically black women’s subjectivities have been constructed as ‘Other’ in relation to dominant discourses of gendered subjectivity (hooks 1992). The idea of multiple subjectivities is most relevant to the research I have done as many of the participants conceive of their own subjectivities as multiply located and multiple in constitution over time.

In *Hair Matters*, Ingrid Banks takes an in depth look at how hair functions in articulating cultural, social and political notions of beauty amongst African American women in the United States. This book covers some of the critical aspects I address in my own research.

“*Hair Matters* illustrates how hair shapes black women’s ideas about race, gender, class, sexuality, images of beauty and power.” (Banks, 2000: 3).

In Chapter One, “Why Hair Matters: Getting to the Roots”, Banks discusses the social and cultural context in which black women’s perceptions of hair are constructed. She

looks at racial ideologies that have dominated mainstream media in prescribing what is attractive. She suggests that beauty is represented as being 'white and blonde' in the media. She goes on to evaluate the impact this has had on how black women internalize their own beauty against this dominant image. Banks discusses the process of the 'devaluation of natural hair texture' for black women, as a result of existing in relation to the dominant image that excludes 'natural' hair. (Banks, 2000:22). If the dominant representation of beauty in the media is that of a young white blonde woman, what does that mean for black women's 'natural' hair? Perhaps the term 'natural hair' needs to be reconsidered as a descriptive term, as Kobena Mercer advises? Mercer suggests that the very idea of 'natural' hair is not as 'authentic' as is often assumed and has in fact been created for particular political motives.

"Both these hairstyles (The Afro and Dreadlocks) were never just natural waiting to be found: they were stylistically *cultivated* and politically *constructed* in a particular historical moment as part of a strategic contestation of white dominance and the cultural power of whiteness."  
(Mercer, 1994:108).

This is a particularly important point in considering the idea that hairstyles are produced out of a specific context for reasons that have social, cultural and historical meanings. For the purpose of decoding the multiple meanings held by natural hair, I shall continue to use the term for its conceptual use. Black women's 'natural' hair carries political and historical meanings for resistance as has been mentioned, yet it is being read as 'unnatural' due to the proliferation of Relaxed and chemically enhanced hair. The notion of Relaxed hair as 'unnatural' is taken up in more detail in Kobena Mercer's article

“Black Hair/Style Politics”. I will discuss this article in more detail further along in this text.

The construction of ‘nappy’ hair in the United States has a long and racialised history. ‘Nappy’ hair represented the undesirability of blackness in relation to whiteness, all of which was embedded in a system of racism and discrimination. Banks continues the discussion by delving into issues of ‘good and bad hair’ amongst black women. There is no detailed description of what exactly ‘good hair’ is but she alludes to it as being long and straight. This renders ‘bad hair’ as short, curly, ‘nappy’ hair. (Banks, 2000:29). This distinction does not stand-alone, as it is understood in conjunction to skin color and tone. The theorization of the politics of hair provides a lens to other areas of bodily performativity-skin colour, clothing, smell and so on. Banks illustrates this point when drawing connections between ‘good hair’ and being light-skinned. Having ‘good hair’ and light skin is desirable and attractive, in relation to ‘bad hair’ and dark skin, which is undesirable. (Banks, 2000). This is an important connection when dealing with constructions of hairstyles amongst black women. Skin colour and tone are integral to the discussion on ‘good’ hair and ‘bad’ hair’ as co-constituting factors in a discourse that favors ‘whiteness’ as a dominant mode of beauty. An analysis on hair styling that does not take into account hierarchies of skin colour fundamentally disregards the complex nature of the racial politics involved in the aesthetics of beauty amongst black women. Understanding hair politics within black communities requires a broadened view of hair as it is embedded in race and class politics within specific contexts.

What does this mean for black women's sense of personhood when the aesthetic of beauty is translated through hair texture and skin colour, two critically important sites for racial stratification. I am interested in uncovering how these fine and crucial distinctions operate in a South African context. Further than this, theorization critically suggest that the desire to 'be white' has animated these performativities for African-American women, and I want to understand if in a South African context, negotiation of black hair as performance is essentially an issue of "wanting to look white" or whether constructions of 'good hair' become so embedded in black culture that a new discourse is created on looking a particular kind of black.

The idea of 'good and bad hair' also speaks to the notion of desirability and sexuality. 'Good hair' is not in and of itself 'good' but is desired because of what it represents as being attractive and sexy. Having 'good hair' that is long and straight signifies attractiveness and sensuality in a way that short, 'nappy' hair does not. 'Good hair' can be flicked, it moves in a way that allows for certain kinds of sexual expression. As will become more evident in my research, the ability for hair to move (part of its 'goodness') is a way of expressing flirtation. The expression of sexuality has much to do with how one's hair is styled, amongst other things. These notions arise in the analysis of my research and reflect important meanings for femininities

Banks connects the notion of femininity and sexuality in the discussion in, "Splitting hairs, power, choice and femininity". Banks questions the participants on their ideas about the relationship between hair and femininity. The general reflection amongst the

participants was that hair is closely associated with notions of femininity, quite simply, long hair is considered feminine while short hair is considered masculine. (Banks, 2000:88). A woman's gendered identity is embodied through the length of her hair. It is not unusual for physical appearance to mark one's gender. Yet, the racial connotations in this representation of feminine are embedded in the social fabric that understands beauty as being white. The process of being gendered in this context is also racialised. One of the participants in Banks' study,

“Points to the white women on television, in magazines and in romance novels with long, flowing hair as representative of femininity in US society. Therefore, femininity is not merely associated with long hair as described by Pearl (one of the participants) but with white women.”  
(Banks, 2000:89).

Kobena Mercer immerses himself within the discussion of black peoples' representations of beauty in *Welcome to the Jungle* (1994). Mercer enters into a discussion interrogating the mass significance of hair within black communities. He is skeptical of the assumption that hair straightening amongst black people is an automatic signification of black people's self-loathing and a desire to look white. In questioning these assumptions he takes a historical look at constructions of various hairstyles. (Mercer, 1994). Mercer examines the notions of 'good' and 'bad' hair and their connections to a racialising of beauty, much as do many other texts that seriously critique representations of beauty amongst black women; (hooks 1995; Hill Collins 1997; Leeds Craig 2000). Mercer



makes a powerful connection between hair and race that has particular prominence for why hair matters in a South African context.

“...We can see that where race is a constitutive element of social structure and social division, hair remains powerfully charged with symbolic currency.” (Mercer, 1994:102).

Taking into account South Africa's history and the ramifications of institutionalizing a system of racism, hair as a symbol of race and class, still has significance in a post-Apartheid South Africa. Only thirteen years have past since democracy was established in South Africa and the effects of a system dictated by racial classification are still being felt through people's everyday experiences, one of which being the meanings of hair.

Mercer evaluates hairstyling amongst black people as it relates to the myriad of meanings of blackness as an identity and as a signifier of social position. In understanding hair in this manner, necessarily takes the view of hair as carrying social, political and cultural significance in a broader context of race and class issues amongst black people. (Mercer, 1994:104).

“I suggest that when hairstyling is critically evaluated as an aesthetic practice inscribed in everyday life, *all* black hairstyles are political in that they each articulate responses to the panoply of historical forces which have invested this element of the ethnic signifier with both social and symbolic meaning and significance.” (Mercer, 1994:104).

It is clear from Mercer's article that understanding the hair politics of black people requires a critical reading of the context in which black people are situated. This reading

involves analyzing other aesthetic aspects of black peoples lives, including issues of skin colour and dress code. A look at the ways in which black people are constructing their everyday lives is necessary for evaluating the meanings of hair within a situated context.

Mercer elaborates on this point,

“To reconstruct the ...political economy of these (Afro and Dreadlocks) black hairstyles we need to examine their relation to other items of dress and the broader historical context in which such ensembles of style emerged.” (Mercer, 1994:106).

As Mercer states, I do not think it is possible to fully understand the meanings of hair politics for black women without an understanding of the social and cultural context in which these hairstyles take shape and value.

Unfortunately, Mercer does not critically engage issues of gender in this text. Instead, he theorizes hairstyling amongst people as though they exist as a solid block. There is little engagement of the significant differences in the way hair as a symbol of beauty has been constructed differently amongst black men and black women. As such, Mercer does not evaluate hairstyling as it relates to femininities and masculinities. I intend on making use of Mercer's work for exactly this purpose, to shed more light on how hair and its various meanings are deeply embedded in the construction of black femininities. Mercer's work holds particular significance for my research for the ways he begins to interrogate hairstyling as a practice that is socially, culturally and politically constructed. As such, hairstyles need to be understood as representing a social and historical milieu. The issue of hair straightening as a contested site of blackness, cannot simply be attributed to a

desire to look white, but requires a more nuanced reading for the meanings this hairstyle has as a symbol of modern and urban blackness, once again depending on the context. (Mercer, 1994).

“...The element of straightening suggested resemblance of white people’s hair, but nuances, inflections and accentuations introduced by artificial means of stylization emphasized *difference*.” (Mercer, 1994:119)

I suggest and my research will reflect what this *difference* is constituted of and how it is performed and embodied amongst young middle class black women.

*Women and their Hair* by Rose Weitz is an article detailing a research report on women ‘seeking power through resistance and accommodation’ by examining negotiations of hair politics. (Weitz, 2001). This article examines the hair politics of women from diverse backgrounds living in the United States. It provides interesting conceptual terms, such as power, resistance and accommodation. She makes use of these terms in looking critically at how women negotiate the meanings of hair as a political tool in reference to power. (Weitz, 2001). Weitz uses Foucault and Lee Bartky in theorizing power as it relates to the body. Weitz defines power as,

“The ability to obtain desired goals through controlling or influencing others.” (Weitz, 2001:668).

She speaks about the body as a site through which power struggles are articulated. She suggests that power be understood through the ways that women discipline their bodies specifically focusing on hair as a means for exploring femininity. (Weitz, 2001:669).

Weitz discusses the various intricacies involved in defining resistance and the pitfalls that follow when it is defined 'too broadly'. In this article she uses a definition of resistance that encapsulates women's actions relating to hair management.

"...We need to...define resistance as actions that not only reject subordination but do so by challenging the ideologies that support subordination." (Weitz, 2001:670).

Weitz offers a definition of accommodation, which as she suggests, should be read in tandem to resistance and not 'as opposing' factors.

"Accommodation refers to actions that accept subordination, by either adopting or simply not challenging, the ideologies that support subordination." (Weitz, 2001:670).

I do not think that to accommodate is to "accept subordination", however, I do appreciate the reading of resistance and accommodation as co-existing and co-constitutive of an action. I think it is possible for an action to contain traces of resistance and accommodation simultaneously.

Weitz proceeds in theorizing her findings through these conceptual tools by thinking about power as it is exercised through resistance and/or accommodation. These tools have been helpful in thinking about how my participants negotiate their subjective experiences of the dominant notions of beauty.

Weitz makes an important yet seemingly simple statement in her opening paragraph,

“...I argue that women’s hair is central to their social position.” (Weitz, 2001:667).

It is this premise that mediates much of her discussion. I draw on this premise and take it further by proposing that hair and constructions of beauty are also central to women’s understanding of their gendered subjectivities. Gendered subjectivities are powerfully raced and classed in a post-Apartheid context. This article has been useful to me in two ways, firstly, for positing the importance of the politics of hair amongst women and for articulating this importance as having social and political meanings for gendered subjectivities. It has also been useful for me in terms of thinking through ways of understanding the multiple meanings of the construction of hair and gender.

The article by Maxine Leeds Craig, “Race, beauty, and the tangled knot of guilty pleasure” (2006), examines various conceptions of beauty amongst African American women. The article takes an in-depth look at the representations and meanings of beauty as race and class mark them. In examining these representations Craig begins to demystify race as a political project embedded in beauty as a discursive practice. Craig also analyzes the gaps in feminist theory and research on the meanings of beauty as it is raced and classed. (Craig, 2006).

“I suggest that we look at beauty as a gendered, racialised and contested symbolic resource.” (Craig, 2006:160).

It is within this framework that the discussion on beauty is conceived and expressed throughout Craig's article. When considering beauty as gendered, racialised, contested, symbolic and resourceful, a fruitful analysis can be made from the intersection of these aspects. Though each aspect may act individually to shape conceptions of beauty, it is their intersection that produces both practices and theory heavily negotiated in and through the body. Beauty as gendered may be the most obvious conceptual understanding of beauty. There are relatively clear prescriptions for ways that women and men are to perform beauty differently. Beauty as racialised has had a long history and role in terms of the way we have derived the meanings of beauty. Understandably, beauty standards will always be contested due to their subjective realities. As much as dominant representations of beauty exist within popular constructions, they are continuously shifting and being contested by and from those upon which these images are expressed. Beauty as symbolic is most important for understanding why and how notions of beauty have gained such prominence in how women negotiate their gendered subjectivities. Beauty as a concept and practice is located in various discourses that have meanings for peoples' lived realities. Lastly, beauty as a resource can be understood when considering what it represents and how its currency is valued in particular contexts.

A discussion on the standards of beauty requires that I put forward the ways in which beauty has conceptually been articulated within a discourse of race. This discourse has favored light skin black women over dark skin black women, as previous articles cited in this text have mentioned.

“Dominant beauty standards that idealized fair skin, small noses and lips and long flowing hair defined black women’s dark skin colour, facial features, and tightly curled short hair as ugly.” (Craig, 2006:163)

It is this relational definition of beauty as reflected through skin tone that reigns as a dominant construction even today. This construction is based on a white ideology of beauty that clearly prescribes beautiful as being white. It would be far too generalizing to suggest that this is an ideology that exists everywhere in the world. Although, I do suggest that this ideology has prominence particularly in the lives of black women, especially in contexts that have experienced racial segregation at some level. This is an idea discussed in Kobena Mercer’s book, *Welcome to the Jungle*.

Craig makes reference to role of the ‘gaze’ in constituting an increased ‘female self-surveillance’. (Craig, 2006:162). She critiques Young and Bartky (1980) for their lack of specification in theorizing on the male gaze. How does this gaze exist in a social context with networks that prescribe particular ways for being gendered, raced and classed? I wish to consider the ways in which the gaze constitutes itself as a policing mechanism amongst black women. This is not to disregard the male gaze, as has been theorized in much depth and detail, but rather to think through how women use this gaze amongst themselves as a means of policing and monitoring femininity. As my research will reveal, a strong presence of self-policing, similar to ‘female surveillance’ occurred amongst the participants I worked with. There was a definite sense of having to ‘perform’ for each

other and maintain a standard of beauty and attractiveness that had been co-constituted amongst themselves.

I now return to Amina Mama's book *Beyond the Masks*, to look specifically at, the constructions of black femininity. Mama focuses on, "the discursive production of black femininity in the British context". (Mama, 1995:148).

Mama discusses the production of black femininity through notions of attractiveness and beauty and suggests the ways this is racialised. This article reflects similar theories on notions of beauty as has already been cited above. The idea that beauty is racialised is a significant point when considering the role beauty plays in constructing notions of femininity. It is for this reason that I choose to reiterate and continue considering how the various contexts reflect a beauty discourse that is racialised. Being beautiful and attractive as black woman involves being light skinned with long straight hair, as this is the predominant notion of beauty. The predominant notion of beauty is 'blonde and blue-eyed'. (Mama, 1995:151). Mama argues that the desire for black women to attain this image is more than just wanting to look like white women but about wanting to be attractive to men in a dominant patriarchal world that prescribes beauty as white. (Mama, 1995:151). This idea speaks to the dominance of heteronormative constructions of gendered identities and the idea that to be considered attractive as a heterosexual woman means being attractive to men. Mama discusses the construction of femininity as being linked to being sexually desirable to the opposite sex. Mama is theorizing within a heterosexual paradigm here. The point at which femininity, sexuality and attractiveness meet is highly contentious and political. As I am drawing links between femininity and



understandings of hair, this point is particularly interesting, as hair becomes a commodity that can be used to embody this meeting point.

Mama proceeds in the discussion to how the attaining of a heterosexual relationship reinforces femininity.

“This ‘have-hold’ discourse makes getting and keeping a man a key site in the production of femininity”. (Mama, 1995:149).

I am interested in researching how and if this ‘have-hold’ discourse has relevance in how the women I work with produce their gendered subjectivities. The literature has indicated that hair plays a crucial role in the construction of femininity for black women, how then do understandings of hair locate themselves in heterosexual relationships? Although this is not the focus of my research, I do suggest that notions of heterosexuality will be relevant in thinking about the performance of femininity in different contexts. I shall look more comprehensively at issues of sexuality and black femininity further in this text.

Moving on to some keys writing on South African contexts, I draw on Zimitri Erasmus, Nakedi Ribane and Sarah Nuttall. Zimitri Erasmus writes an important article, for understanding issues of hair and race in South Africa entitled *Hair Politics*.

“This chapter explores hair as both a cultural construct and a site of contestation, both within black communities and between black and white communities.” (Erasmus, 2000:381).

Erasmus draws on Kobena Mercer’s work for conceptualizing meanings of different hairstyles. Erasmus briefly discusses South Africa’s political system and the way hair

was used as a marker of race to enforce institutional decisions affecting people's lives. (Erasmus, 2000:381). She engages issues of hairstyling as a practice and the importance of presenting oneself as a 'respectable' young woman. Erasmus writes as a 'coloured' woman and her work is located within the particular politics of constructions of 'coloured' identity in South Africa (Erasmus, 2000:382). As such, though her work has relevance for my research, there are different politics involved in the way women who identify as 'coloured' 'exist' in the relationship between race and beauty, as compared to 'black' South African women. Most importantly in her article she makes the explicit connection between issues of hair and hairstyling as linked to race. The way black women engage, contest, appease, confront hairstyling is inextricably linked to how race is configured and embodied in a given context. (Erasmus, 2000).

*Beauty...A Black Perspective* by Nakedi Ribane (2006) takes a historical account of the beauty industry in South Africa. It looks at the ways in which beauty has been historically constituted in South Africa by considering the Western influences in dictating a paradigm of the aesthetics of beauty particularly through beauty pageants and competitions. *Beauty* is written by a former South African model and conceptualizes beauty as it is performed and reproduced in the modeling industry and beauty pageants. (Ribane, 2006). This therefore situates beauty in a particular discourse that has implications for how beauty will be interrogated. This book is not an 'academic' text but it has been useful in providing an 'insiders' reading of the South African beauty industry as it has developed over the years. I think the book serves as a way of reading a period of time in South African history that has been predominantly characterized as highly politically charged

and violently experienced. The book acts as a counter narrative to this perspective and presents alternative ways of remembering this history. (Ribane, 2006).

“Despite the political goings-on, people didn’t dwell on their misfortunes. Every situation was seen to have its funny side and tragedy and hardship was converted into wit or song” (Ribane, 2006:42).

Although this book is important for re-reading history, I should note that this book does not make any theoretical propositions to the history of beauty in South Africa but surfaces a few of the key issues concerning fashion, style and beauty during the time. One of these key issues being ‘the skin lightening trend’ of the 60’s. The 60’s were a time of growing political resistance in South Africa, with incidents such as the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960. When skin-lightening products were introduced they settled comfortably into an existing institutional system privileging whiteness, and thus providing a means for attaining this whiteness. (Ribane, 2006:51). Ribane describes the effects of the cream,

“They did a good job of ‘taking away the blackness’ and making you look good. On first application, the skin would become smooth and yellowing, giving a lovely complexion, all pimples and blemishes vanishing like magic. With progressive use, however, the hydroquinone in the products would ‘eat up’ the skin, making it very thin and vulnerable to the strong ultraviolet rays of the sun, since it had not protective layers” (Ribane, 2006:51-52).

She makes use of phrases such as ‘making you look good’ and ‘giving a lovely complexion’, in relation to these products. This reflects an engrained belief of a racialised beauty that was a dominant discourse at the time and continues to the present day.

“When those ‘*chubabas*’-which were the purpled patches on the cheeks and below the eyes-hit you, Baby, you had to go and purchase those big, owl-like sun goggles that were fashionable then.” (Ribane, 2006:52).

This quote is testimony to the normalizing operation of living within a discourse of beauty that could literally disfigure your face. In retrospect, allowing *chubabas* to form on your face seems a rather drastic extension of the beauty paradigm. Yet, as with many performative aspects of beautifying, the deliberate process of beautifying is so deeply entrenched into notions of respectable femininity, it sometimes requires retrospect to separate these ideas. Notions of ‘respectability’ differ across contexts and need to be read closely for what they reflect on constructions of femininity. In the context Ribane writes adhering to ‘respectable’ femininity required following a beauty trend entrenched within racialised constructions.

Sarah Nuttall writes about an emerging youth culture in Johannesburg in “Stylizing the Self: The Y Generation in Rosebank, Johannesburg” (2004). She writes about an urban youth culture, she refers to as the Y Generation, based in Rosebank, an affluent Johannesburg suburb.

“In discussing urban visual cultures, I pay close attention to modes of stylizing the self increasingly common among young people in the city. By *stylization of the self*, I am referring to how people seek to transform

themselves into singular beings, to make their lives into an oeuvre that carries with it certain stylistic criteria.” (Nuttall, 2004:432)

Nuttall’s notion of “stylizing the Self” is important for thinking about how urban youth cultures constitute themselves through style and fashion. This article focuses on how a select group of youth, make use of visual cultures in creating a sub culture that is not only self-naming but produces images to represent themselves (Nuttall, 2004). In terms of my own research some information can be drawn from Nuttall’s work, namely, the political and social processes involved in “stylizing the Self”. Nuttall paints a picture of the youth that resonates with how my participants are engaging in being young women in South Africa, “...a new generation of South Africans who have the means to shift the culture at large and of reassembling the past, the present, and the future-in the process creating a specific urban culture that has emerged as one of the most decisive cultural shifts in the post-Apartheid era.” (Nuttall, 2004:435).

This article is primarily located in Johannesburg and as such draws on the “The Zone” in Rosebank, as a cultural space undergoing re-definition by the Y Generation. My participants are located in Cape Town, which has it’s own political and social configurations within which the urban youth are producing similar, yet also different meanings of youth cultures. Nuttall’s Y Generation seems to be closely connected to notions of “the township” in a way that my participants are not. The Y Generation with its association to Y Magazine, *loxion culture*, and *kwaito* music does not hold currency for the constructions of identity at work amongst my participants. (Nuttall, 2004:433) These are all social ‘indicators’ that have particular prominence in Johannesburg and for

the meanings of a growing middle class in Gauteng. My participants are differently located politically, socially, and culturally. This is not to say that similarities cannot be drawn between Nuttall's work and my own research, I just chose to do so selectively.

*Deterritorialised Blackness: (Re)making coloured identities in South Africa* by Janette Yarwood looks at how blackness as a socio-political identity is being reconstituted in South Africa through the utilization and re-configuration of black popular culture. Yarwood suggests that young Coloured people, located primarily in the Western Cape, are articulating their notions of blackness through 'the global popular'. (Yarwood, 2006). By using hip-hop as a site allowing for similarities to be drawn between black ghetto culture in the US and the presence of a Coloured hip-hop culture predominantly in the Cape Flats, creates a notion of blackness that is transnational. I am most interested in the ways Yarwood, with the aid of Gilroy (1993) and Hall (1998), conceptualizes global popular identities as being disseminated at a local/national level that results in a new configuration of identities at the local level. As is so aptly discussed in this article, there is an asymmetrical relationship between the transfer of popular culture between the centre (the US) and the periphery, (South Africa). That being said, it is important to note the increasing degree to which local identities, in this case blackness, is undergoing a transformation and expansion to include global popular constructions of identity. Even more intriguing is the way this occurs through the global transfer of culture as a commodity. (Yarwood, 2006). Yarwood alludes to the commodification of black popular culture globally, but does not refer directly to the effects of this transfer of goods, as it impacts local constructions of identity. Black popular culture has become something that

can be bought. It is packaged, sold and distributed globally. Yarwood makes reference to this in the beginning of her article, when she comments on the prevalence of American hip-hop in South Africa. (Yarwood, 2006:46). It is the commodification of a culture that translates into impacting identities that has relevance for the research I conducted. My participants, as will become clearer throughout this thesis, are in prime positions to purchase this global popular notion of blackness. They can afford to 'buy into' this culture and as such have been significantly influenced by it, as it relates to their personal articulation of blackness as a social and political identity. The participants have formulated their notions of beauty on icons within hip-hop culture in the United States, this amongst other influences. The asymmetrical relationship is interesting to consider when one thinks about the impact American popular culture has on the youth in South Africa. The transferal of culture, as goods, is predominantly occurring one-way. What does this mean for how local subjectivities are negotiated in a local context?

I have chosen another article detailing the role skin colour plays in black women's lives article, entitled "*If you're light, you're alright: Light skin color as social capital for women of color*" by Margaret L. Hunter.

"This article examines how skin color stratification and patriarchy interact to limit the life chances of Mexican American and African American women. The analysis focuses on education, income and spousal status as life chances to demonstrate the wide impact that discrimination against women of color still has in African American and Mexican American communities" (Hunter, 2002:175).

This article furthers the discussion on skin colour from being primarily concerned with aesthetics to having an impact on various trajectories of lived realities for women of colour. I found this article useful in highlighting the issue of skin colour stratification amongst women of colour while also examining the social discourses that reproduce the ideology 'if you're light, you're alright'.

Hunter defines skin colour stratification as, "the differentiation of lightness or darkness of skin tone" (Hunter, 2002:175). From this definition she deduces 'hierarchies of skin color as systematically privileging lightness'. (Hunter, 2002:175). The issue of skin colour stratification has a long history located in various geo-political sites. I am going to draw on the background and literature presented in Hunter's article as framing the discussion of its role amongst women of colour in the United States. This history creates particular meanings for skin colour stratification in the United States. South Africa has its own history of institutionalized racial segregation that produced particular meanings of racial identity, in a South African context.

"The creation of skin color hierarchies for African Americans dates back to the American system of chattel slavery. Slave owners used skin color as a basis to divide enslaved Africans for work chores and to create distrust and animosity among, them, minimizing chance for revolt." (Hunter, 2002:177).



Hunter's argument for the connection between light skin and social capital is relevant to the ways my participants conceptualize issues of skin colour.

"I contend that light skin works as a form of social capital for women. In this case, light skin tone is interpreted as beauty, and beauty operates as social capital for women" (Hunter, 2002:177).

Hunter defines social capital as "a form of prestige related to things such as social status, reputation and social networks". (Hunter, 2002: 177). She goes on to discuss the importance of beauty amongst women, as it provides currency for social mobility. It is the function of beauty as social capital that highlights the importance of the aesthetic of beauty in creating feminine subjectivities. Hunter refers to Leeds' (1994) where,

"She found a pronounced awareness of black men's preference for light-skinned women as well as a desire on the part of girls to have longer and straighter hair". (Hunter, 2002:178).

This shows the degree to which beauty as associated with whiteness has created social and popular discourses amongst young black men and women. I found similar results in my own research. It raises questions for the meanings of blackness in contemporary society particularly as it is located in gendered identities and for the importance of beauty. Hunter makes a crucial point about this popular discourse and its operation amongst Black women.

"This is an example of how the ideology of beauty is used to organize women into a 'beauty queue' where the pigment of one's skin and the texture of one's hair determines how socially desirable one is in the marriage or dating market". (Hunter, (1999) in Hunter, 2002:178).

I think the key arguments in the case of skin tone are that dominant representations of beauty in American and South African media are of white women or images that resemble whiteness.

“... To be defined by mainstream US society as beautiful, most women must have light skin and European facial features, especially women of color.” (Hunter, 2002:178).

If beauty is defined by whiteness, what does that represent for the meanings of blackness? How and where do women of colour locate their own notions of beauty? Hunter provides a commentary from Hill Collins on the ideology that an association with whiteness as beauty necessitates blackness as ugly.

“Hill Collins (1991) argued that standards of beauty that privilege whiteness can only function by degrading blackness. Identity is relational, and those who are defined as beautiful are only defined as beautiful in relation to other women who are defined as ugly. Collins contended that white beauty is based on the racist assumption of black ugliness” (Hill Collins, 1991 quoted by Hunter, 2002:178-179).

It is the ‘degrading of blackness’ through ‘privileging whiteness’ that presents itself as most problematic in my research. The ease with which the participants reflect on light skin as being ‘universally’ desirable, leads me to question the embedded notion of blackness as being undesirable.

Hunter demonstrates through her research the various ways lightness is valued in the US, along the lines of income, education and spousal status. It is not my intention to make similar claims in a South African context, but rather to put forward the tensions that arise between the intersection of race and gender for black women. I recognize the differences and similarities between these contexts and as such draw on this literature to explore the relationship between race and gender in a South African context.

I have thus far mapped out some theories on the aesthetics of black beauty, looking specifically at hairstyling and issues of colourism amongst black women. I now wish to turn the discussion to focus on the ways black femininity and sexuality has become intertwined. A key and critical author on the intersection of race, gender and sexuality is bell hooks. bell hooks has dedicated much of her literary work to examining the constructions of subjectivities for black women. She has looked critically at the body as it is conceived, constituted and performed.

I focused on the article *Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace*. hooks writes critically about the commodification of black female sexuality in contemporary popular culture. She comments on the ways this representation has been constructed and how black female bodies have become objects of fetish and fascination. (Hooks, 1992).

“Although contemporary thinking about black female bodies does not attempt to read the body as a sign of ‘natural’ racial inferiority, the fascination with black ‘butts’ continues.” (hooks, 1992:63)

This fascination has to be read critically and as part and parcel of a discourse that prescribes highly sexual ways of representing black female bodies. This is not simply a matter of re-inscribing racist ideologies, but has become a contemporary, 'fashionable' and desirable signifier of sexuality amongst black women. Artists such as Beyonce, Fergie, Jennifer Lopez and Shakira are popular beauty and fashion icons within the music industry, all of whom make specific effort to perform their bodies in ways that accentuate movement of the 'butt'. Beyonce released an album in 2005 entitled *Boytiscious*. The album aimed at creating new ways of viewing larger 'bums' as attractive and desirable. With a newly imagined and glamorous image of the 'bum' came the representation of young black female sexuality as associated with independence, success and modernity. This is one example illustrating that black female sexuality needs to be examined within a context that is reshaping meanings of sexuality and beauty.

"Unmasked, the 'butt' could be once again worshipped as an erotic seat of pleasure and excitement." (hooks, 1992:64)

This was precisely the impact Beyonce's album had on young girls around the country, not to mention the globe. This album not only condoned an appreciation of the 'bum' but it also inspired an image of attractiveness that located desirability at the 'bum'. This is not to say that this new image of beauty exists outside of a view that capitalizes on the black female body as wild and intensely erotic. This image is still an objectification and performance of black female bodies that marks them as hypersexual. Yet, if we are interested in understanding contemporary popular constructions of beauty and femininity, these are the images we need to deconstruct and analyze. hooks further illustrates this point,

“...many black woman singers, irrespective of the quality of their voices, have cultivated an image which suggests they are sexually available and licentious...which defines beauty and sexuality as desirable only to the extent that it is idealized and unattainable, the black female body gains attention only when it is synonymous with accessibility, availability, when it is sexually deviant.” (hooks, 1992:66).

This is precisely what can be seen with the female musicians I mentioned earlier. The increased ‘hype’ and attention around these artists is magnified and concentrated on their appeal as sexually available. hooks also makes reference to a few black female icons in contemporary mass media, such as Tina Turner, Diana Ross, Naomi Campbell and Iman. hooks suggests that for black women to assimilate themselves into popular culture requires subscribing to the image of black women as wild, primitive and highly sexualized beings. (hooks, 1992). We see that the impetus to portray women in this light has a history beyond contemporary constructions of female stardom. Icons such as Tina Turner and Diana Ross launched their careers in the sixties upon the their image as sexually ‘expressive’ and ‘available’ women (hooks, 1992).

hooks links the sexual representation of black women’s bodies to hair and suggests that like the ‘butt’, hair has been a signifier to hypersexuality and eroticism amongst black female musicians (hooks, 1992:70). She makes reference once again to Tina Turner and Diana Ross as utilizing hair to portray an ‘animalistic sexuality’. Most indicatively, these musicians often wore synthetic hair as a means for displaying this image. (hooks,

1992:70). This once again reiterates the point that black women's 'natural' hair is undesirable and requires altering in order to be represented as beautiful. hooks analyzes one issue of *Vanity Fair*, with Diana Ross on the cover. In this analysis, she refers to the ways that hair has become a commodity, illustrating the way bodies are consumed into an industry of commodification.

“Since the hair is produced as a commodity and purchased, it affirms contemporary notions of female beauty and desirability as that which can be acquired.” (hooks, 1992:71)

This point will be of importance in my research, when looking at how the participants conceive of beauty as a commodity to be purchased. Due to their economic positioning, they are able to fully endorse this consumption, yet find themselves at a crossroads in terms of what is available to them as young black women.

hooks is particularly critical of popular culture as it creates spaces for the inclusion of black female bodies as beautiful. She discusses the criticism encountered by fashion magazines for not including black women. As a response to this criticism, few magazines, including *Elle*, *Vanity Fair*, and *J. Crew* began introducing black women into their pages. Yet, black women were often represented in ways that portrayed them as primitive, wild and sexual. (hooks, 1992:71).

“Imported beauty, she (Naomi Campbell) like Iman, is almost constantly visually portrayed nearly nude against a sexualized background. Abandoning her 'natural' hair for blonde wigs or ever-lengthening weaves, she has great crossover appeal...she embodies an aesthetic that

suggests black women, while apparently 'different', must resemble white women to be considered really beautiful." (hooks, 1992:73).

hooks uses two very famous fashion icons in making her point. Although, it can be argued that the fashion industry is in favor of portraying young women as sexual objects, the manner in which this occurs for black women is distinct. As hooks stipulates, black women are depicted as 'different' and their sexuality associated with the primitive. Yet, while doing this they are made to 'resemble' white women in order to be viewed as beautiful. This is a crucial point for my research. hooks is able to clearly map out the scene in which young black women have to draw from contemporary popular images of sexuality and race. The public arena has represented black women in ways that restrict and confine us to positions for public consumption. The popular imaginary for black female sexuality has trapped us into the virgin/whore dichotomy. I am interested in how black women are to reconstruct this imaginary in ways that deem us subjects of our own sexuality as opposed to objects subordinated through sexuality.

Cornel West has also written extensively on race relations in the United States, in his article, *Black Sexuality: The Taboo Subject*, he proposes that rethinking the ways black sexuality has been conceived in the public arena is an important step for healing 'race relations in America'. (West, 2007:315). He suggests that a lack of acknowledgement and communication about sexuality amongst black people has resulted in black people despising their own bodies. This self-loathing has allowed for a mystification of black sexuality amongst black people. (West, 2007). West proceeds with this line of thought in proposing that the taboo around black sexuality is also fostered in white communities,

and that “white fear of black sexuality is a basic ingredient of white racism”. (West, 2007). Although this article is useful to me in foregrounding the connection between race and sexuality; it does not deal specifically with intersections between race, sexuality and beauty for black women.

An African theoretician, Mustafa, writes about the intersecting functions of beauty and the erotic for Senegalese women in a context, which she has defined as being ‘in crisis’.

“By looking at beauty we follow local agents whose contemporary debates show that beauty is of social, moral and practical consequence. Through self-care, care of intimate others and adornment women reassemble bodies and selves that are jeopardized by patriarchy and crisis” (Mustafa, 2006:6).

This article proves relevant to my research for contemplating and re-imagining the ways that women use beauty and body adornment to act as a response to dominant discourses of beauty while simultaneously being deeply embedded within these discourses. Mustafa comments on the social capital body adornment plays in reaffirming class stratifications. She explains how middle class Senegalese women make use of their attire, at particular economic costs, to maintain their social class in a time when the political economy of the country is jeopardizing that position (Mustafa, 2006:11).

She also looks at how re-imagining the power of the erotic, as understood by Audre Lorde, as “...the deepest life force, a force which moves us toward living in a fundamental way. And when I say living I mean it as that force which moves us toward



that which will accomplish real positive change”, can be a means for generating female agency. (Lorde, 1983 in Mustafa, 2006). Although I have not used the erotic as a conceptual tool in this research, I do think that the ways in which Mustafa makes use of this term can instruct me to consider alternative spaces for the re-imagination of beauty, such that it is more than an aesthetic appendage, but more deeply located in the constructions of self. At a time when women’s sexuality, particularly black women, exists in a context of escalating gender-based violence, HIV/AIDS, finding ways to navigate one’s sexuality and personhood are critical. Mustafa makes reference to this struggle, “women negotiate patriarchal regulations of the body while establishing their own agency through the aesthetic cultivation of the body in a collective of women” (Mustafa, 2006:9).

Returning to bell hooks in *Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance*, she continues the discussion of black female sexuality through the lens of mass consumer culture and the way it creates a process of Othering. The Other becomes a vehicle through which a dominant white patriarchal culture can explore and exploit the bodies of those ‘different’ to them for the pleasure of experiencing the ‘wild’. (hooks, 1992). She discusses this process as occurring through mass media in a contemporary form yet replicates and descends from a colonial period where black bodies were a minefield for white exploitation. Commodification as understood through the process of Othering is critical when deconstructing notions of subjectivity, that are consuming and being consumed within popular culture.

“Currently, the commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated via exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other’s history through a process of decontextualization” (Hooks, 1992:351).

This highlights the relationship between consumption and difference, where the Other is being ‘eaten’ through various forms of popular culture and thus deconstructing and reinventing a culture that no longer represents the Other. This is the context in which I began theorizing the construction of beauty as a creation of consumption where female bodies are consumed and are consuming this ideology. The consumption of this ideology works to confine black women into structured and regulated notions of beauty. This consumption simultaneously provides very real and tangible modes of understanding black femininity. The ‘paradigms of consumption’ become politically contested sites when the consumed use dominant, hegemonic discourses to frame their collective understandings of Self. The title of the article ‘Eating the Other’ becomes a powerful point that encapsulates the dimension of consumption as linked to an Othering process. Black female bodies operate invisibly though crucially at the centre of reproducing a culture of ‘dangerous consumption’.

hooks retells a story about an incident when she was “walking behind a group of very blond, very white, joke type boys” in New Haven, USA. The men were discussing their plans to have sex with as many girls as possible, specifically from other racial groups, before graduation, with black girls being foremost on the list. (hooks, 1992: 345). This is

a good example of how the consumption of black bodies for the use of exploring the 'wild and exciting' occurs.

"They claim the body of the colored Other instrumentally, as unexplored terrain, a symbolic frontier that will be fertile ground for their reconstruction of the masculine norm, for asserting themselves as transgressive desiring subjects." (hooks, 1992:345-346).

Black female bodies become the field in which these games are played and consumer culture plays a large part in creating this desire and providing means of satisfying the desire. hooks makes the claim that consumer culture has been instrumental in fostering a desire for the Other as something beyond the realm of the 'norm' and into a field of more 'intense' and exotic relations.

These conversations amongst the young men are not confined to an American context nor are they only the sentiments of white males. I have been privy to many conversations amongst young black men who seek frivolous sexual encounters with white women as a means of exploring the Other and being glorified for having conquered the 'forbidden'. There are different political and social dynamics at play in each example. Yet what remains important is the use of female bodies for enacting the personal agendas of masculinity and how consumer culture operates in reinforcing the availability of these female bodies.

Timothy Burke writes a detailed history of commodification and consumption in Zimbabwe, entitled *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, consumption and*

*cleanliness in modern Zimbabwe*. Chapter six of his book looks at “the commodification of cleanliness, domesticity and the production of ‘modern’ African bodies” (Burke, 1996:167). This relates to my own analysis of ‘modern’ black femininities being constructed through notions of beauty in relation to ideas of female respectability and cleanliness. The history of the use of soap as being introduced by the missionaries to create new ways of conceptualizing African bodies is discussed in the book. A new political economy of grooming is created that marks ‘clean and hygienic’ bodies as desirable and accessible through the use of toiletries, toiletries being commodities to be accessed in the market economy (Burke, 1996). The implications of this ‘modern’ body works to mark African bodies as different. This has consequences for the urban/rural divides, it in fact creates new meanings of urban and rural spaces. Those who were able to afford and access toiletries where located in the urban space, complexifying the meanings of rural as not only less modern but therefore stigmatized as unclean. These commodities become signifiers of ‘status and power’ and the body functions as a political site to access and reproduce this power. (Burke, 1996).

The introduction of products such as skin lighteners and hair straightener’s further politicize the cultural meanings of adorning the body.

“Lighteners have explicitly defined a charged intersection between social aspirations, wealth, race and political activism among Africans” (Burke, 1996:180).

Female bodies undergo a series of transformations that distort, mangle and scar this site in the name of ‘beauty’. I contend that this scarring continues today through various

socially acceptable mechanisms, namely, Relaxing one's hair. These products provided the means by which to assimilate into a modern and contemporary livelihood both in post-war Zimbabwe and in post-Apartheid South Africa, although the use of skin lighteners was highly contested in political and social life in Zimbabwe at the time. The idea that the use of these lighteners was a direct rejection of African ideals and culture and an acceptance of white, colonizing culture was actively contested (Burke, 1996:190).

“As histories of domesticity and advertising in Zimbabwe amply demonstrate, colonial institutions most concerned with generating new subjectivities among Africans or altering aspects of African culture often considered women to be the crucial population for the success of their project” (Burke, 1996:193).

“Most users said that lighteners had ‘beautified’ people” (Burke, 1996:192). It is for this reason that we have to interrogate the very fabric upon which the notion of beauty is constructed and the ways in which beauty is utilized to represent intersecting locations of status, power and class. This is the history upon which young women in sub-Saharan Africa are constructing their notions of beauty today. As ‘modern’ as their notions may seem they are built from past ideologies of beauty that are immersed in race, class and spatial divides. Skin lighteners were a means of differentiating African people, those with status and those without (Burke, 1996:192). Burke goes on to describe how female bodies became projects upon which political agendas were conducted.

“The woman with lipstick, eyeliner and powder on her face has thus often been as much an object of desire as the subject of criticism” (Burke, 1996:197).

This is similar to hooks' theorizing on black women's bodies as political site for pleasure and danger. There is a dual objectification of women's bodies, even as 'subjects' that functions to constitute women as objects without agency. Skin lightening products as a colonizing project served to racialise beauty while simultaneously producing a commodification of this beauty to stratify class distinctions. The 'project' of female beauty is then raced and classed to the detriment of those sitting on the lower end of the stratification structure, rural black women. The cultural meanings of the urban/rural divide get transmitted through the bodies of women (Burke, 1996:201). Although I am working with a middle class group of women, class divides are relevant for the ways these women maintain and perform their class status. They use different hairstyles and clothing as social indicators reflecting their position.

I have reviewed a range of literature in an attempt to set up a 'literature context' from which to ground the theoretical projection in the chapters to follow. I have looked at literature on bodily performances, constructions of subjectivity as discursive practices, notions of hairstyling as a political site reflecting racial ideologies, and representations of black sexuality. This literature review aimed at connecting various bodies of knowledge in mapping out how hair as a lens to bodily performativity can show intersections of race, gender and class. I plan on using a few primary theoretical concepts in developing the analysis of my research. The various texts citing the dichotomy between 'good' and 'bad' hair will be a central theme throughout my overarching analysis and will continuously be referred to in understanding negotiations of race and beauty. Butler's work on performativity will be key in thinking about how the participants perform their gendered

identities through the perspective of beautification. Mama's theorizing on subjectivities will be critical in guiding a review of how the participants engage in constant, evolving self-definition.

The next chapter will take a close look at the dominant notions of beauty as valued by the participants. The chapter will provide an introduction into the 'world of hair' as lived by the participants. The discussion will include a review of the participants' thoughts on beauty and highlight areas of contention and conformity.

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## CHAPTER 5

### Dominant Notions of the Aesthetics of Beauty

I have included an excerpt from a song by India Arie (a contemporary rhythm and blues singer). The song is entitled 'I am not my hair'. The song provides relevant contemporary commentary on why hair matters amongst black women and the personal experience of being a black woman dealing with the social and political meanings of hair.

*[Chorus]*

I am not my hair

I am not this skin

I am not your expectations no no

I am not my hair

I am not this skin

I am a soul that lives within

*[Talking:]*

What'd she do to her hair? I don't know it look crazy

I like it. I might do that.

Umm I wouldn't go that far. I know .. ha ha ha ha

*[Verse 2]*

Good hair means curls and waves



Bad hair means you look like a slave  
At the turn of the century  
Its time for us to redefine who we be  
You can shave it off  
Like a South African beauty  
Or get in on lock  
Like Bob Marley  
You can rock it straight  
Like Oprah Winfrey  
If its not what's on your head  
Its what's underneath and say HEY....

These lyrics are an introduction into the idea that ones hairstyle speaks to their identity. This will be an idea reflected by the participants throughout this chapter. This song was released soon after India Arie had cut off her dreadlocks and shaved her head. Hence the song is also a response to the volumes of criticism she received after making this choice. In two stanzas she summarizes the section on 'good' and 'bad' hair reflecting its racial and political implications, "good hair means curls and weaves, bad hair means you look like a slave" (Arie, 2006).

This chapter will address aspects of beauty related to hair grooming that have particular salience for young middle class women located in South Africa. The chapter will explore

how certain dominant notions of beauty take shape in the lives of the participants. Various hairstyles will be discussed while examining the negotiated meanings of 'doing hair' in a South African context. The hairstyles chosen for discussion reflect either contested sites of beauty and/or dominant ideas of hair grooming in this context. The chapter will also look at how skin hues construct notions of beauty deeply entrenched in racial ideologies.

Dominant notions of beauty are constructed within a paradigm that articulates a clear dichotomy between what is desirable and what is not. Both constructions are constituted by each other and in opposition to one another. The use of the narratives generated within the focus groups became a key instrument for conveying the stories of these women, in ways that acknowledge and honor their lives. Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael discuss the relevance of narratives in a South African context, in "Autobiographical acts", "The individual, in this context, emerges as a key, newly legitimized concept...talking about their own lives, confessing, and constructing personal narratives-on the body, on the air, in music, in print-South Africans translate their selves, and their communities, into story." (Nuttall & Michael, 2000). The narratives of these young women construct the bulk of this Dissertation as it was my intention to integrate their stories into the literature on African women's lives.

The initial focus group discussion launched into the hair politics experienced amongst the participants. The discussion covered procedural concerns for doing hair as well as the symbolic aspects of hair grooming. Themes emerged from the 'group conversation' that

directed the research focus. I have used these focus groups as ‘fluid’ narratives from which I have drawn the information discussed in this and following chapters. Each chapter will engage with the focus groups in this manner and will proceed as an analysis of the issues discussed and debated amongst the participants. I intend on presenting the material I gathered as a narrative conveying the complexities involved in being young black women in this post-Apartheid moment. As the narrative grows so do the insights and reflections of the women as they reveal the vulnerabilities and challenges experienced in their lives.

A discussion of dominant notions of the aesthetics of beauty involves unpacking the hair narratives formed through the focus groups as a means for creating the language spoken about hair and familiarizing the reader with the pool of hairstyles available to these women.

#### Good hair vs. Bad hair: Dichotomizing black femininity

A clear distinction between good hair and bad hair was identified early into the focus group. The participants spoke of ‘good hair’ as that which was desirable and consequently ‘bad hair’ being undesirable. ‘Good hair’ is hair that is long, thick and has volume. It should be able to ‘blow in the wind’ and move easily when flicked. ‘Bad hair’ is hair that is thin, or in its ‘natural’ state described as ‘nappy hair’, or hair that is ‘un-kept’. ‘Bad hair’ can take various forms, the most typical of which being hair that is thin and ‘lifeless’ as described by the participants. When Relaxed, hair can be considered

‘bad’ if it is ‘un-kept’, meaning that there is growth and the hair is due to be Relaxed again.

‘Good hair’ is fairly standard as defined by the participants, it must be long and thick. ‘Good hair’ can be created through hairstyling procedures. Relaxing ones hair, conditioning, and treating hair regularly can produce ‘good hair’. An important factor when considering ‘good hair’ is the time, money and resources spent on creating and/or maintaining ‘good hair’. As reviewed in Chapter 4, Erasmus uses Biaya’s work for reflecting on the association between class status and hairstyling. During the post-independence period in Africa, straightening one’s hair was representative of being within the ‘urban middle class’ and thus also represented an aesthetic form of modernity. (Biaya 1998 in Erasmus 2000). Hair straightening as a symbol of modernity and urbanization also carries currency amongst the women I worked with. Having ‘good hair’ (straight/relaxed/chemically modified) represents access to urban-ness that is important for ones performance as a young middle class woman.

This dichotomy is also important for the cultural capital that having ‘good’ hair buys one in the context of an African cosmopolitan world. The women do as much as possible to attain a resemblance of ‘good’ hair as it speaks to being fashionable, “trendy” and representing respectable black femininities. ‘Good hair’ is amplified through fashionable and “trendy” styles. Clothing also plays an important role for representing modernity and cosmopolitanism, this will be discussed in more detail in the chapters to follow. Most importantly, ‘good hair’ acts as currency for accessing beauty and attractiveness. Having the currency to buy this notion of beauty is what makes the dichotomy between ‘good’

and ‘bad’ hair so important. Having ‘good’ hair represents status in a system that is stratified along economic lines. Erasmus discusses this aspect of hair grooming as it relates to ‘buying into’ global constructions of hairstyling. (Erasmus, 2000). The dominance of North American trends in constructing fashionable hairstyles are extremely important as will be discussed later in this chapter, but what I would like to draw attention to for now, is the substantial meaning given to class status as indicative for affording “trendy” hairstyles. Having ‘good hair’ usually requires a great deal of work and time for most black women. This work involves regular visits to the hair salon, continual pruning and conditioning of one’s hair. This is a marker of class in terms of who can afford certain hairstyles and how different social classes construct desirable and undesirable hairstyles.

I became increasingly interested in the ‘cultural capital’ (Hunter, 2002), held by the participants’ dominant notion of beauty. Inherent in the notion of ‘good’ hair and ‘bad’ hair is an engrained idea that black women do not ‘naturally’ have ‘good’ hair and are thus constantly in quest for it. As reviewed in Chapter 4, the notion of ‘natural’ hair as something authentic and not worked upon has already been dispelled in Kobena Mercer’s work in *Welcome to the Jungle*. Yet what is important here is the idea held by young women that their hair cannot be beautiful unless it is tended to and worked upon through the various hairstyling practices mentioned.

As one participant said:

“... black people don’t have hair that is beautiful” (Focus Group 1A, pg 2: 2006).

I suggest that a compromised sense of black female subjectivity is created within the binary of 'good' and 'bad' hair. As Lola Young discusses in "Racializing Femininity", beauty for black women has involved implicit negotiating of the meanings of self through a paradigm that prescribes beauty as white. (Young, 1999)

"...I will argue that historically notions of beauty and femininity have long been racialized although this racialization has not always been explicit or acknowledged. This leads to an examination of the ways in which constructs of blackness, whiteness and femininity intersect and may be mutually dependent..." (Young, 1999:68).

For the purpose of this Dissertation, I will not be focusing on constructions of whiteness, but, as is pointed out by Young, I do recognize the relevance and value of looking at constructions of blackness and whiteness in tandem.

#### The Weave: Making it work

This section deals with the political, social and economic meanings of a particular hairstyle, the Weave. I have chosen to dedicate a section of this chapter to the Weave because of its function as a site for the representation of 'good hair' while simultaneously embodying multiple meanings for a dominant representation of beauty. A weave is when one uses human or synthetic hair and bonds it to one's own hair either by using glue or by sewing the hair on. One of the participants clearly explained how a weave is done.

"Participant 1: They plait your hair, like they cornrow it, yeah like your hair and then they leave some of it at the front so that they and then they sew it on, onto the cornrows that you've done. And they can do the cornrows in any direction, like this one time I did a

weave and they did my cornrows like this and it worked out great and sometimes they do your cornrows like in a circular thing sometimes they do them just meeting here ...” (Focus Group 1A, pg 7: 2006).

This procedure results in a hairstyle that is aimed at looking like your ‘natural’ hair even though it is usually suspected, amongst black women, that it is not your ‘natural’ hair. The human hair bears the most resemblance to ‘natural’ looking hair as compared to the synthetic hair. As such human hair is more desirable, but also more expensive. The participants commented on a good Weave as being one that does not look like a Weave at all. Yet a Weave is always distinguishable from ones ‘natural’ hair. It is this seemingly clear contradiction that sparked my desire to understand the Weave more.

“Participant 2: ... Like the thing with weaves is that it mustn’t look like weave (group laughter) and that’s so hard to do, like find someone to do a good weave for you” (Focus Group 1A, pg 8:2006).

Why is it important for the weave to not look like a weave? What does this hairstyle mean for one’s subjectivity? How are a woman’s class status, respectability and sensibilities negotiated through this hairstyle? There is not a great deal of literature on the Weave as a site for understanding meanings of hairstyling as they relate to race and class. Other hairstyles are discussed at length such as Afro’s and Dreadlocks, but the Weave has not been explored sufficiently. As such I relied heavily on the material gathered in the focus groups.

After much discussion with the participants, their interest in and desire for Weaves was to become much clearer to me. The most important aspect of the Weave was that it allows them to appear as though they have long, straight hair with volume. As was discussed earlier, this is the representation of 'good' hair. Long hair as linked to femininity was an important point for the participants. Having long hair made them feel more feminine and thus more desirable to men. A Weave allows one to attain long hair without having to wait and grow your hair, but can be acquired with one visit to the Hair Salon. This is not to say that the up-keep of a Weave is simple. Most of the participants spoke about the rigorous work that goes into maintaining the look of a Weave. This includes washing and blow-drying it frequently and regular visits to the Hair Salon. Once again the idea of a meticulous procedure to maintain 'good hair' appears. Yet despite the large amount of money and time spent on this hairstyle it is still considered most favorable amongst the participants.

### 'The Flick'

I now turn to another issue concerning hairstyling, but not in fact a hairstyle itself, the 'flick'. The participants described 'the flick' as when your hair falls in front of your face and then you deliberately and conscientiously flick it back. A seemingly banal exercise can carry significant weight in its meaning for the kind of hair one needs to have to do 'the flick' and what 'the flick' therefore represents. Your hair needs to be long and straight to achieve the 'perfect flick', which as I described earlier is the dominant



construction of good hair amongst the women. Intertwined in the physical aspect of 'the flick' is its meaning for heterosexual displaying of affect.

"Participant: Thato has the flick

Participant 4: You move your hand across the braids that have fallen and then you look at them (boys) and then

Participant: It drives them wonders

Participant: And makes boys hearts melt" (Focus Group 1A, 2006:14-15)

The notion of the gaze is at play here in this description. The interaction between men and women as described here is subtle yet important in showcasing heterosexuality as a performance. Being able to use your hair as a means for attracting the gaze and the idea that this can occur by having long, flowing hair is crucial for the construction of desirable hair. There is an element of control and agency exercised by the women in practicing this flirtation. Craig (2006) refers to Iris Young and Sandra Lee Bartky's work on disciplinary beauty practices. In this discussion she refers to Young's perspective on the masculine gaze and how women internalize this gaze.

"Women take up the view of themselves as things 'looked at and acted upon', and use cosmetics, diets, and other disciplinary practices in attempts to craft themselves into more beautiful things." (Young, 1980:148 in Craig, 2006:162).

In as much as I think this holds true for these participants, I also believe that the women have a degree of agency in terms of how they engage with the masculine gaze. When the

participants speak about 'the flick' and its effects on men, I do not think that they are solely being 'acted upon'. The participants are not simply being watched. They are active in this interaction and 'play' with the masculine gaze. They have learnt ways of negotiating their sexuality in relation to the gaze. I do however recognize that this performance is embedded within a discourse that suggests ways for women to enact femininity for the male gaze. It is no coincidence that 'the flick' involves a display of affect that simultaneously represents an image of femininity as something on display.

The participants go on to discuss the different kinds of 'flicks' one can have depending on how they do their hair. There is a 'flick' with Braids, another with Relaxed hair and then one with a Weave. Whichever hairstyle one chooses to have, 'the flick' is seen as being highly desirable amongst the women.

"Mazuba: But you all like the flick, the flick is a good thing?"

Participant 2: The flick represents

Participant: I think

Participant 2: the fact that you can um your hair moves, yeah I think that's all the flick represents.

Participant 5: The fact that you look fresh, I don't know, Relax doesn't do the same"

(Focus Group 1A, 2006:14)

Once again 'the flick' essentially represents a dominant notion of 'good' hair, which is necessarily contrary to black women's 'natural' hair. As the women discussed their own desire to have long hair 'that blows in the wind and could flick', I remember being a

young teenage girl wanting the same thing. This part of the conversation resonated with me, as did many of the conversations with the women, and reminded me of a time in my own life when these particular notions of beauty rang true. Although I am still very much embedded in this discourse, I have chosen alternative ways of articulating and performing an aesthetic of beauty.

#### Natural hair: A form of Resistance or Style?

This section discusses the multiple meanings ‘natural’ hair has for black women and how these meanings can be used in relation to social status. In discussing the participants’ hair stories, conversation about which hairstyles would never be done arose. One of the participants spoke about never wanting to cut her hair. This inspired conversation on the meanings of cutting hair and what it represents and how people, particularly their peers, view it. In this discussion it was clear that the women felt that long hair is linked to a sense of femininity in a way that short hair is not and cannot be. They spoke about the need to use one’s hair as an accessory. Being without long hair requires that you heavily accessorize other parts of the body in an attempt to perform femininity lost through cutting one’s hair.

“Mazuba: And short hair?

Participant: Short hair also makes you...

Participant: But that’s new though, like this whole black people cutting their hair, doing this David Beckham (British footballer) hairstyles, that’s very new

Participant 1: And it's like it also says something like the stuff you wear, the clothes you wear say something like by looking at what you're wearing I'll form some perception of, okay she's like.

Participant 2: But if I have to think of a chick's hairstyle is, my first thing when I see a chick with no hair is that she must be stylish or very chic because very few black or in my opinion very few black girls can cut their hair off and look good, so they must know what they are doing or they must know who they are.

Participant: And they must have a pretty face to match and obviously they must be brave.” (Focus Group 1A, pg 10-11: 2006)

This passage speaks to three major ideas. Firstly, the influence of popular culture in producing fashionable trends for young people in terms of body adornment. This is a theme that will be picked up in more depth in the chapters to follow. Secondly, the opinion that how a woman does her hair means something about the type of woman she is. This refers precisely to the idea that having long hair makes a woman more feminine than short hair. A ‘more feminine’ woman in this sense is more fashionable. Lastly, that cutting one's hair requires courage as it places you on the peripheral border of dominant contemporary black femininity. It also speaks to the enormous social pressure to conform to the hegemonic notion of beauty for young black women, and to not subscribe to this notion is considered a rebellion. This rebellion represents having to ‘brave’ possible social exclusion, and hence women who dare engage in this rebellion, “must know who they are”. The women suggest that this peripheral position can either be a way of articulating political resistance or simply a fashion choice. Either way, it was evident that

cutting one's hair is viewed with a questionable and skeptical gaze for its meanings for femininity.

I would like to focus on the idea of rebellion and 'bravery' as they relate to cutting one's hair. This is a provocative site from which to consider how hairstyling has significant meanings for femininity as embedded within social and political networks. The question of rebellion arose again in discussing women who keep their hair natural in the form of an Afro. Afro's have a political and social history that marks a personal resistance and collective defiance. The Afro as a symbol arose at a time when political resistance rooted within meanings of race was rife in the United States. (Craig, 2006:171)

"The meaning of straightened hair radically changed within black communities in the early 1960's. African-Americans developed new techniques for creating unstraightened hairstyles as the Afro emerged as a new symbol of racial pride." (Craig, 2006:171)

The 1960's saw the rise of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. A time marked by an increasing desire to pronounce a belief in black peoples humanity. The conviction to claim Civil Rights essentially represented a claiming of recognition for black people. (Mercer 1994; Young 1996). This is the context in which the Afro gained its prominence and relevance for black people. Erasmus and Craig discuss the meanings of the Afro in relation to hair straightening where these hairstyles existed in opposition to one another. (Erasmus, 2000; Craig, 2006).

"The Afro became a sign of cultural resistance to the oppression of white racism. Also referred to as 'the natural', the Afro engendered a particular

politics of black hair. In this discourse the concept of 'natural', kinky hair was equated with blackness and Black Consciousness". (Erasmus, 2000:384)

Although, the participants do not have a personal engagement with these political resistances, these messages take particular shape in a contemporary sense of fashion and style. Due to a shift in time, context and reality, the Afro still carries the meanings as assigned in the 60's but not in opposition to the meanings of hair straightening. Erasmus comments on the meaning of the hair straightening as succumbing to a white ideology of beauty. She uses bell hooks as well as Alice Walker to cement the idea that hair straightening represented wanting to look white in relation to an Afro representing pride in one's blackness.

"...bell hooks condemns hair-straightening as 'an imitation' of white peoples looks often indicating 'internalized racism, self-hatred and/or low self-esteem' and as a reflection of a 'colonized mentality'. (1995:81 in Erasmus, 2000:384)

The idea that hairstyling can represent a sense of blackness and/or African-ness is discussed in Erasmus' article. Erasmus questions bell hooks' stand on hair straightening. She discusses whether hair straightening is in fact a means to looking white or rather requires a more textured and nuanced reading in the context of black cultural practice. Erasmus uses Mercer's understanding of black hairstyling as being representative of creative and innovative ways of expressing one's cultural history. (Erasmus, 2000)

“He (Mercer) challenges a purist, essentialist view of hair-straightening as negating the ‘natural’ beauty of blackness and as representing aspirations towards Eurocentric notions of beauty. To him hair straightening does not have to be about imitating whiteness and so be about being less black. It is simply a different means of expressing blackness-a means of expressing blackness differently” (Erasmus,2000:386)

I do not fully endorse this reading of hair straightening. I do not believe that hair straightening is simply a ‘means of expressing blackness differently’, to say so would disregard the complex relationship between race and ‘cultural’ meanings of hair practices. Hair straightening does not exist as a style without context. I believe that it is a hairstyle that has gained in relevance and popularity amongst black people, precisely for its representation and meanings for class and race. I do however believe that we need to broaden our perception of hair straightening such that it is more than a simple attempt “to look white”. As Erasmus refers to by use of hooks’ arguments, hair straightening does in fact represent a necessary ‘rite of passage’ into young femininity for many black women. When you were old enough to straighten your hair you did and it also marked an entry into sexualized body. (Erasmus, 2000:386). These different meanings of hair straightening are relevant today, although I do however think that we need to place hair straightening within the context of a beauty ideology that prescribes very particular ways of being beautiful. These ways of being beautiful have political meanings in terms of race and class. Hair straightening is embedded in a discourse of beauty that says to be beautiful one must have the means to purchase ‘trendy hairstyles’ and these hairstyles often represent an ideology of beauty that has developed out of a notion of whiteness.

The discussion on hair straightening has shifted as I mentioned earlier. Straightening one's hair does not hold the same dominant cultural meanings as implied by hooks. The discussion about natural versus chemically modified hair has evolved into a concern for being a part of a whole that prescribes beauty along fine lines. The beauty parameters include hair straightening where natural hair exists on the periphery. This next passage is taken from a conversation about women who keep their hair 'natural' with Afro's. This passage illustrates where the discussion about 'natural' hair has shifted for young women today.

"Participant 2: ...It's just brave of them to take that step, you know and not relax their hair and leave it natural and nappy.

Mazuba: So, when you don't relax it's like your making a bold step?

Participant: Yeah, cause it's what everyone is doing (group yeah)

Participant 1: It's usually Organics that do that

Participant 3: Yeah, there's a look

Mazuba: What are Organics?

Participant 1: Organics are those chicks, that are like 'I am an African' (group laughter) they write poetry, they wear Stoned Cherie (a local up market fashion label) and Sun Goddess (Another local fashion label, mainly 'African' style clothing) type thing."

(Focus Group 1A, pg 10: 2006).



The idea of braving social exclusion by keeping your hair 'natural' arises again. The participants highlight for themselves that keeping your hair 'natural' requires courage, predominantly because it goes against a dominant grain that prescribes beauty for black women as having to chemically modify their hair. The links between race and gender become evident as these women negotiate ways of being young black and beautiful amidst a popular discourse that dictates how to be. The participants suggest that a refusal to Relax one's hair and keep it 'natural' occurs in conjunction with a political and social identity located in the post-Apartheid moment. 'Organics' as described by the participants represent a South African form of political resistance and renaissance that is raced, classed and gendered. The participants have named a particular image indicative of the post-Apartheid moment and in doing so, they are producing a discourse in which this moment is being experienced. An 'Organic', as the women have termed it, is in fact an image that has been in circulation within South African media since the late 90's. This image arose as a means to mark the emergence in the production of local fashion labels as trendy in South Africa. This image made use of political icons and made them fashionable symbols, e.g., *Drum* T-shirts, Che Guevara T-shirts (Nuttall, 2004). This fashion trend attempted to re-inspire pride and honor in a notion of being young and African as it is articulated in contemporary South Africa, through popular culture and the historic struggles that have led us to where we are today. Unfortunately as the mass media tends to do, this message has become distorted and become merely a fashion symbol without the initial political and social commentary intended. One of the participants' comments on this occurrence.

“Participant 1: I can go with a Woolworths and buy, a “I love Africa”, an “I love Africa” top and that doesn’t make me more aware and more African. That’s just, I’m trying to follow a trend, you know...” (Focus Group 4A, 2006:pg 8)

There is another ‘look’ described by the participants as ‘I am Rain’. It is distinct from being an ‘Organic’, which is focused more on an ‘African’ style. ‘I am Rain’ speaks to an alternative (not dominant but also not subversive) expression of femininity. This look is aptly described by one of the participants.

“FV2: ... I am Rain. You know, the wind flows between my skirt and my, like the sun can hit me in any direction and I just feel like I’m one with the earth and my shoes are the flattest they can go on the floor, before they start being like just my feet and my top is not, my top’s not like being all you know, like

FV: Glittery

FV2: Glittery and what not, it’s just like a plain vest as thin as possible before it becomes see through and like you know, my skirt is thin and flowing and when I’m walking, I catch the little breeze on a hot day and I get perfect sun and I just look free and I am rain” (Focus Group 4A, pg7: 2006)

The progression of this discussion amongst the participants illustrates the way a focus on hair politics can ‘organically’ lead into discourses that incorporate other facets of bodily performativity. The connection between hair and clothing happens fluidly in their conversations as fashion styles-both reflecting hair and clothing-interlink to create ‘looks’ and ‘trends’ that circulate within discourses on beauty. As the participants converse about

performativity they draw on 'diverse' styles as a means to access discussion on the links between race, class and gender.

The following discussion led to a more detailed and specific look at various dressing styles and how they carry meanings for femininity. Central to each dress style was a comment on hairstyle and how the two perform an active role in constructing popular images. One of the major images was a predominantly 'African' and 'modern' style. The participants discuss these different looks as outsiders providing social commentary on fashion and style. In this conversation several themes arise. Firstly, the dominant idea that a black woman's hair speaks to her personhood as was mentioned above. Secondly, that the production of an African cosmopolitanism in conjunction with "authentic" African dress and style. Thirdly, the negotiation of multiple identities for the participants; and how this stresses the dichotomy between modern and urban contexts and an African/traditional world. This leads to the last topical issue arising from this conversation, which is in fact encapsulated by the previously mentioned issues, the meanings of an African identity in a post-Apartheid context.

"FV3: Yes, I agree with what Amani is saying and I tend, I tend to think that people who are more, who where, you know, head wraps or have dreadlocks or had their natural coarse hair, are more African or they just, their look is more African, they're expressing themselves like they're not, they're not westernized you know, like they don't have the silky hair and they don't, yeah, I think they are more African and they're more deep. Like I'd expect them to know about political issues in Tanzania. You know or to know whom

the last president of, whom the last president in Ethiopia was. You know, just, they're more aware, they're more in touch and they're more interested in things African than maybe other girls who wear, who have straight, silky relaxed hair, who wear jeans all the time and they're just. I don't want to say other normal Black girls but other Black girls who are more westernized.

M: Has that been your experience? Like when you meet somebody who's wearing a Steve Biko top that they talk about (indistinct) and if someone has their hair relaxed (indistinct) skirt and doesn't know about

FV3: To me it's not just a (indistinct) top because I've been to and lived in other African countries, so it's not just the Steve Biko top, it's an African attire. I don't know when I say African attire, do you know what I mean? It's the actual material that you know, it's African material, those flowing long dresses or the wrap skirts it's not just wearing a Steve... but these are like people who, I don't

FV4: It's like they're constantly making statements, just by wearing that...skirt it's like they're saying "I can live in the modern world and still be true to my African-ness" ...

FV3: Well actually yes, that's true. I wear it when I'm forced. Like for my sister's wedding the traditional side. I had, my Mom gave me this thing, like you have to wear it. I mean, I didn't mind, like "no I'm so embarrassed". I like it, but I would never go to Varsity wearing, yeah the most I've done is gone to Varsity wearing, what do they call those things?

FV5: A caftan" (Focus Group 4A, pg8-9: 2006).

This is an important passage in deconstructing the multiple meanings of style and dress particularly as they are articulated through hairstyles and encapsulate meanings for race and ethnicity. The first theme to explore in this passage is the meaning of being African. One participant makes reference to a particular 'African' identity. She describes this African identity as being marked by clothing and hairstyle. Both of which create images of an Africa that she is excluded from, as someone who does not subscribe to the 'African notion' she has described. She further goes on to comment on a 'Westernized identity/image' (which includes having chemically treated hair) as something contradictory to the African identity she had named. Once again, hair is being used as a signifier of cultural identity. The identity, African, grows in definition as she states that having knowledge on African 'political issues' adds to one's African-ness. This knowledge acts as currency into the image of African she proposes. This description of African is once again juxtaposed against an identity that is primarily not African, but also 'normal' and westernized. The idea that 'Western' is not African is not unusual or foreign to understandings of African and/or Third World identities. Uma Narayan covers this same idea in her discussion on how feminism has been called 'un-African'. She critiques the notion that modernity is automatically understood as 'Western'. (Narayan, 1997:24)

"In many colonial and postcolonial contexts, it is difficult to clearly distinguish between the facts of change over time and 'changes due to Western influence', since many of these changes involve complex 'complicities and resistances' between aspects of 'Western culture' and Third world institutions, agents and political agendas." (Narayan, 1997:24).

It is important to critique the term 'Westernization' in and of itself. What exactly does it refer to and how and when is it used? Narayan suggests that, this term has often been used disparagingly to refer to Indian/Third World women who have demonstrated feminist standpoints. It is critical to think about the ways the term 'Westernization' is employed to serve particular political strategies. In naming something as 'Westernized' it immediately creates a dichotomous opposition to another 'national' or 'cultural' notion. Both of these notions are fixed in time, completely disembodied, and existing as rhetorical terms as opposed to having any meaningful reference. Perhaps we need to consider the ways that 'Westernization' is conceived and produced through women's bodies, to understand the context in which this term is disparagingly assigned. The ways in which 'culture' and/or 'tradition' exist in peoples imaginaries as frozen concepts has to be problematized in reviewing how 'Westernization' occurs.

The participant has provided an essentialist notion of African that in fact places herself on the margin of this identity. African and 'Western' exist as contradictory constructions within this narrative told by the participant and reflect necessarily different meanings about subjectivities in part through hairstyles and dress codes.

The participant in the passage above also makes reference to a growing trend to commodify iconic figures associated with Africa. This is a means of production that enforces an African cosmopolitanism in which these women are embedded. The term African cosmopolitanism refers to an emerging hip and trendy way of articulating fashion, dress, and image within African contexts. Although the participant makes it clear

that partaking in this commodification does not in fact ‘make you more African’, it is a commentary on the emergence of a young, hip and trendy notion of African.

The participant raises an important dichotomy that many of the participants are dealing with in their different ways. The participant comments on this “Afro chic” identity as being a statement saying ‘I can live in the modern world and still be true to my African-ness’. This takes us back to the former discussion on the meanings of being African and it also suggests that African is not only not modern, but that modernity threatens a sense of African-ness. The potential threat that African-ness is under erasure through modernity enhances the dichotomy. I think this is a particularly important point for anyone who takes African feminism seriously. How are we defining African such that modernity presents itself as alienating? The notion of African is not fixed in time or space and has evolved and continues to evolve over time. How does one begin to mark the point at which modernity has impacted being African? I am interested in the perceptions of ‘African’ and ‘modern’ by these women. As custodians for a growing African middle class, it is important to interrogate these women’s notions of identity. They represent a collective of individuals who are grappling with the meanings of African in the new millennium while negotiating meanings of gendered subjectivities along race and class lines.

“If you’re light, you’re alright, if you’re brown stick around, if you’re black stay back”

The final section of this chapter will engage issues of skin color and how they are embedded in notions of beauty amongst black women. While writing and researching this

Dissertation, notions of skin color arose as embedded within the hair politics of black women. Understanding hair politics requires an in-depth analysis of the politics of race and class amongst black women.

The discourse on skin color amongst black people is something that I have become socialized into and I was interested in finding out how the participants responded to this discourse. The valuing of light skin is so entrenched in the notion of beauty for black women that I found it difficult to surface a conversation around it. The embeddedness of this ideology created barriers for me to even enter the conversation. Growing up as a young black girl in a South African, African context, it is almost impossible to exist outside of this discourse and connections between the politics of hair and those of skin colour are intertwined both in the theoretical literature I had drawn from, and within the participants' own expressions of "beauty" in relation to hair performativities.

Once I had opened up this conversation, the women responded to ideas about skin colour and beauty much as I expected. Being light makes you pretty and being dark makes you not. This is essentially the crux of their discussion. They did debate amongst themselves each person's preferences in relation to skin color, but I think this was as a result of how I broached the question.

"Participant 2: ...on girls you see the thing is with girls especially black girls um the light ones yeah by default they're pretty (group laughter) but when you see a dark girl, a light, a light black girl is by default pretty because she's light and well I feel black people have



sort of conditioned themselves to believe that the lighter you are the more beautiful you are

Participant 1: I agree

Participant 2: I don't know if it's a westernized um I don't know if it's something we've been brainwashed..." (Focus Group 2A, 2006:2)

Listening to the women discuss these notions of beauty I felt a deep resentment for how 'naturalized' this discourse has become. I wanted to know how the women internalize this idea and what it means for their own subjective knowledges on beauty and attractiveness. I began to ask myself certain questions about this ideology. Where do we receive these messages as black women, what are the sites for the reproduction of this ideology and how do we transform this discourse? The conversation proceeded along different lines and as such we did not have the opportunity to further the discussion at the time. Due to my own internal uneasiness with this topic, I returned to it in a later interview. In the next focus group I made a conscious choice to really probe the women to start thinking about where we learn about light skin/dark skin values and what it means for them to reproduce this discourse.

The first question I asked was where do you receive the messages about skin color. One of the participants responded by saying...

"Participant 1: I just, I think I got it from the adults around me when I was growing up like my mom's light my dad's not light but my mom's light and it just seemed as though everyone was like she's the you know she's the prettier one you know like people who

are light, like oh a baby and it's so light ha ha, in like a oh wow this baby is light and so cute and like wow so and so's wife she's yellow, yellow, yellow (group laughter) she's so pretty and then the wedding song there are those songs that like um that this bride looks like a Coloured (group laughter) that's how the song goes, and it means you have to be quite light to look like a Coloured, so you're like geez you know you're just surrounded by these these adults around you telling you that being light is nice and then my gran, my gran would be like eh, Amani get out of the sun you're gonna go dark and then my mom would be like oh my child you don't look very healthy today you, eh, you guys go to ... you come back so dark and you look so you know, like dark, it's just always bad to be dark (group laughter) so that's where I got it from ha ha, and they'll be like look at your cousins they haven't washed in like a week, they look so dark you know, ha ha, things like that everyone who was dark was just bad for me that's where I got it from." (Focus Group 3A, 2006:4)

It is clear from this passage that one site for the reproduction of this discourse has been familial ties. What emerges from a reflection on these messages is the social capital associated with being light skinned. As the participant retells stories from her childhood, you can hear the meanings of race being constructed and disseminated through the generations. To construct 'darkness' as undesirable has strong meanings for these women's notions of themselves. This retelling revives a memory of colonial discourses on beauty that mark 'dark' bodies as ugly and appropriate a discourse of whiteness as the dominant means of beauty. The participant speaks of these conversations with her family jovially, which I think is reflective of the complexities and sensitivities involved in this

historical ideology. It appears to be that the dissemination of this knowledge through the generations is done with love and care though it reproduces a racist construction of beauty. I think it is this complexity that I wanted to interrogate as opposed to the mere presence of this ideology as it has become engrained in how black women have come to understand beauty.

I then asked the participants how they felt about the 'light is pretty, dark is not' dichotomy. Their responses differed according to where they place themselves in this ideology.

“Participant 1: I do have an opinion because like when I was little I just felt that my Mom always had to reinforce that it's okay that you're dark (group laughter) you know, you're just dark and beautiful that's what it ... as a child, um you know yeah, you're the, you're my dark, my dark and beautiful child...

Participant 3: My opinion on the whole dark thing. I don't really have one like, it doesn't for me it make (group laughter). I think it's because I'm light so yeah.

Participant 4: I think it's bad especially for younger children cause yeah you do as a dark young child you probably will feel ugly many times in your life, but I mean like you grow up and you get over it like I know that I'm pretty. I'm dark and I'm pretty so yeah, for younger children it's bad.” (Focus Group 3A, 2006:5-6).

It is evident that this ideology has had its various effects on the women. They have each dealt with these effects differently. It seems overall, that they are not or no longer

intimately affected by this ideology. I wonder if in their everyday lives if that would be the case. I think there are strong distinctions between talking about a phenomenon and the lived reality of it. As I am finding more and more with research, a highly emotive or intensively charged topic in theory takes on a different dimension in lived reality. The sharp contestations in our lives occur in a string of moments, but this does not always interrupt day-to-day existence. I would have liked to interrogate further how they resolve this issue in their lives, but once again due to time constraints that was not possible.

By using hair politics as a lens into analyzing discourses on race and beauty, issues of skin colour were able to surface as embedded within racial ideologies. Through conducting the focus groups and thorough listening to the participants conversations, I was able to think through how dominant notions of beauty (predominantly the ‘good/bad’ hair dichotomy), could also have implications for how beauty is read along skin hues. Hair as a political site for multiple constructions of beauty encapsulates negotiations of skin as they are connected to the over-arching theme of hegemonic beauty ideals.

In conclusion, this chapter has considered the ways young people negotiate beauty discourses detailing the particular hairstyles from which they draw on to produce dominant notions of beauty. Through the participants’ articulations, it became clear how the dichotomy between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ hair has functioned in creating aspirational standards of beauty. Alongside this discussion came conversation on how certain hairstyles, (the Weave), and hairstyling ‘practices’, (the ‘Flick’), can endorse a notion of femininity that is both desirable and ‘playful’. The participants commented on their

relationship to hair as a resource for accessing cultural constructions of the 'feminine'. The chapter also looked at the negotiations of 'natural' hair and its various meanings in an urban, middle class context. A reading of these negotiated meanings produced debate about how style-through hair and clothing-is articulated through bodily performance. The political meanings of 'natural' hair take new shape and nuance in post-Apartheid South Africa. The chapter concludes with an analysis of 'the skin color debate' for its relevance in expressing hegemonic notions of beauty from which the participants are firmly located. This debate accessed through thinking about hair politics and its meanings for young black women, highlighted the profound depths to which beauty discourses have been historically racialised.

The next chapter will examine notions of performativity. The chapter will explore various avenues along which black femininity is performed through the body. It will consider how the participants have negotiated their meanings of femininity as analyzed through the lens of hair politics. By talking amongst themselves about notions of respectability as tied to particular hairstyles and clothing styles, the participants' surface their own contested constructions of femininity.

I have included a poem, as a final thought in this chapter. Much of the issues raised in the poem reflect the narratives told throughout this dissertation. The poet is a young South African woman who has experienced a great deal of frustration about her hair. This work reflects some of the contentions she has been thinking through.

## Hair matters

So I went to the salon to cut my hair the other day.

I wasn't trying to rock the boat or stand with fist raised in protest against continual images of blonde beauty that forever leave me out in the cold.

I really wasn't trying to do any of that.

I just went to the salon to cut my hair.

Of course, this was before I knew that a black woman's hair is the site for a major battlefield.

It is governed by a million and one laws, passed down through the ages.

So whether or not you were *trying* to say something, the way you wear your hair says it all.

You see, the battlefield is separated between the natural sistas and their chemically enhanced counterparts.

Those sporting the cornrows, afros, braids, locks and twists are seen as the Nubian sistas.

Their trendy African Renaissance style takes them back to their roots, while still being chic enough to rock at Melrose Arch or Camps Bay.

They are the Thandiswa Mazwai inspired generation – loxion kultcha with a suburban twist.

On the other side of the battlefield lie the relaxers, the s-curls, the straightening irons and, of course, the weaves.

They are the face of acceptable black beauty.

From Isidingo to Cosmo, curvy Beyonce bodies and brown skin give a touch of the exotic, but the straight hair makes them easy to package for the mainstream market.

Spending much time and money to control the curl, rule out all signs of kinkiness.

My light skinned, straight-haired hair stylist looks at me with serious doubt:

Am I sure I want to cut it all off?

It might be a bit too ethnic.

Maybe just a relaxer then I'll definitely look like Halle Berry.

I try to put her mind at ease:

It's only hair, if it looks bad it'll grow back.

She gets a smug 'don't blame me look on her face' and says she hopes my boyfriend is understanding.

I let the comment slide because I'm tired.

I'm tired of trying to convince her just like I was tired of beating my hair into submission.

So I just let it go.

I refuse to stand on the side of the natural or the chemical.

If you're black like me, how about standing for *all* that is dark and lovely – whether it be afro chic or human hair weave.

Stop buying a lie and start selling yourself the truth.

It's a secret you won't see on the big screen but it's guaranteed to set you free.

Don't apologize for who you are and wear your style with pride.

You are lovely as you are.

**Ndoni Khanyile 2004**

University of Cape Town



## CHAPTER 6

### Performing Black femininity

I have entitled this chapter ‘Performing black femininity’ because I want to further engage how the aesthetics of beauty take shape as a performance of femininity amongst young black women. The previous chapter discussed notions of beauty and how they are constructed as politically charged and socially constituted notions. I now intend on drawing on the focus groups conducted to consider the ways the aesthetics of beauty are performed as constituting a notion of black femininity. The focus groups will once again serve to ‘build the narrative’ about hair as a political location. This chapter will look at how the participants perform their femininity as it is articulated through the discourse of beauty, hair being central to this discourse. Using the aesthetics of beauty as a lens to further deconstruct female subjectivities is possible in this context because of how these young women engage politically, socially and culturally with the politics of hair. Performing femininity is a highly contextualized process that occurs through discourses of beauty and fashion for the young women I interviewed. I intend on ‘reading’ these discourses to illustrate how femininities are constituted through highly structured and political nuances of bodily performativity. This chapter will shed some light on the nature of this performance and will highlight the limitations to their expressions of femininity as well as the spaces for new ways of constructing themselves as young black middle class women.

### Feeling Feminine: Embodying the practice of femininity

Femininity as a performative practice can take many shapes. The ways in which women perform their femininity holds meaning for how femininity is produced and re-produced in a specific context. This section will consider how the participants engaged their own ideas of femininity as performed through various meanings of heterosexuality. Sexuality as a heterosexual performance can and does have several meanings. As stated by Jo Helle-Valle, "...sexuality, both as practice and as a discursive theme, is (in Africa as elsewhere) many different things depending on the contexts it is part of and must hence always be analyzed as part of such communicative contexts." (Helle-Valle, 2004:195). This will become increasingly evident in the way the participants describe their own performance of sexuality.

My intention when initially thinking about this section was to convey the restrictions to the ways young and modern femininities are expressed. I began with this premise as it reflected my own engagement with the performance of femininity. I conceived this performance of femininity amongst black women as being a rigidly mapped out practice, taught, learnt and conspicuously policed by the custodians of femininity, other black women. As research can often reveal my initial assumptions did not necessarily hold true for the participants. I realized that a finer and more detailed analysis of performing femininity needed to be undertaken. I began this process by asking the participants when and how they felt most feminine. In retrospect, this may not have been the most suitable means of acquiring the information I desired, but it did surface notions of 'feminine/femininity' as performative. In discussing the ways that the 'feminine' is

understood I wanted to surface the various performative aspects of femininity, which critically concern hair but reverberate throughout the 'arrangement' of the body through different foci, such as clothes, cosmetics, shoes. Most of the participants reported that they felt most feminine when dressing up, wearing make-up, wearing high heels, or wearing clothes that 'show their shape'. Their ideas of 'feminine' were expressed explicitly as a practice. 'Feeling feminine' was something they could choose to engage or not. This illustrates two important points; firstly, accessing the feminine occurs through body adornment. Secondly, it illustrates a dominant notion of femininity amongst young black, middle class women that is based on a commodification of the body. Either way the body is central as a means to accessing and performing femininity. This has several implications for how the female body has been understood, performed, monitored through the medium of popular culture.

“With the advent of movies and television, the rules for femininity have come to be culturally transmitted more and more through the deployment of standardized visual images. As a result, femininity itself has come to be largely a matter of constructing...We no longer are told what “a lady” is or of what femininity consists. Rather, we learn the rules directly through bodily discourse: through images which tell us what clothes, body shape, facial expression, movements and behavior is required.” (Bordo, 1989:94)

Femininity for the participants has become commodified in a context where aesthetics is the main currency, as described by Bordo. Femininity is concerned with images and how closely one is able to imitate the images produced as representing femininity. The

currency acquired through goods, buys one entrance and inhabitation in a popular discourse that represents status and power, in the terms of social capital.

A few of the participants also spoke about feeling feminine in relation to men. They felt that they experienced parts of their femininity through their practice of heterosexuality. This illustrates the role of the masculine gaze in shaping notions of femininity.

“FV 1: ... oh and when I’m getting hit on I feel very feminine, you know, because you do things you know, and you flick your hair and you smile and you giggle and you just feel very, it’s true, when you are being hit on or when you’re talking, flirting or basically, when it’s an interaction with a guy, then I think you really noticed or you, you’re aware of your femininity, or I am...” (Focus Group 4A, pg2: 2006).

This passage shows the way expressing sexuality can be a means for accessing the notion of feminine, that may seem passive but can also be read as an active means in accessing the feminine. It also illustrates the use of hair as a way of expressing sexuality. The practice of heterosexuality can take many forms yet these women are a part of a discourse that prescribes a clear performance, linking hair, movement, and speech of engaging in heterosexuality. This performance blurs the lines between active and passive participants of a heterosexual flirtation, as discussed in the previous chapter. As the participant states, ‘when I’m getting hit on’, which can be translated to mean ‘when a man approaches me to flirt with me’. This interaction requires that women be active, yet is predominantly initiated by men. The participants briefly discussed the inconspicuous learning and now

embedded knowledge on the performativity of heterosexuality in relation to how they, as women, should express this sexuality. This discussion was brief and mostly occurred as a subversive narrative amongst other discussions in the focus groups. It seemed that the participants were slightly hesitant in pursuing conversations of sexuality. This may have been due to several factors. The performance of 'respectable' femininities may have rendered this conversation 'off-limits', the nature of our relationship, in a research context, may not as yet created the space for such disclosure. However, assumptions aside, I do think this would be an interesting conversation to pursue with these women, as I feel that various notions of sexuality play an important role in constructing modern femininities.

Discussion on various notions of sensuality and the 'appropriate' spaces to perform this sensuality as well as what it means to inhabit a body that is sexed involuntarily emerged from the focus group. The participants spoke about their ideas of sensuality and feeling 'feminine' as linked to feeling beautiful and sexy. They spoke about feeling beautiful within themselves, as opposed to receiving outward confirmation. They also spoke about feeling sensual and sexy when they get dressed up, i.e. wearing make up and high heels etc.

"FV2: I feel most feminine when I'm dressed up, but not, I don't have to be wearing a dress or a skirt. When I'm wearing high heels I think, when I'm seriously wearing high heels to go somewhere, not to test them out, just when I'm really wearing high heels when I'm going out and when I don't feel feminine, I feel like a girl most times, except if I'm trying to wear like boy-like clothes, or pants that don't fit me properly and things that

make, like, doesn't show my shape more. Like things that just makes me look like a big, T-shirt and pants or something, then I don't feel very feminine, but most times I feel feminine." (Focus Group 4A, 2006: pg 2)

"FV1: I feel most feminine when, it coincides with when I feel most beautiful. That's when I feel most feminine, you know, but "ja" most of the time, but that's when like I'm all dressed up, that's when I feel more feminine, when I've done everything that women do, hair, make-up, high heels, you know. When I'm done up then I feel most feminine, ja". (Focus Group 4A, 2006: pg 2)

(Responses to questions about feeling sensual)

"FV2: It's not just like feelings, beautiful like, as a person, as a woman, just you know, just feeling like you're the most beautiful thing in the world, like, "ja", just special and I don't know, I'm not really sure, I just think of it as like a good feeling, like when you feel beautiful, "ja". (Focus Group 4A, 2006: pg 4)

"FV3: Yes, I totally agree, feeling sensual is when you feel beautiful and when you feel sexy, that was what I was going to say." (Focus Group 4a, 2006: pg 4)

"FV2: I don't necessarily like have to be looking like I'm going out, you know, its not necessarily that I've dressed up now and you know, I'm going out, because I look beautiful. I just think of it as like when either someone makes me feel beautiful, like, you know, no matter what I'm, like first thing in the morning, whatever, like just the inner,

you know, feeling like, yes like you feel like you're attractive, whether you like all done up or not... I don't need and I don't need someone else to tell me that I'm like attractive, or sexy because I may be, like if I'm, my eyes will probably just woke up and then (indistinct) like, "Gee'z, you look sexy." Even if they really mean it, I don't think, I don't think I look sexy, how could like you know. So I have to first convince myself that maybe you're confused or something, you need glasses or something, you know. I first have to convince myself, but I feel, was the question when do I feel *most* sensual or most sexy or attractive, also when I'm all dressed up or when, "ja", with interactions with other people, other, other guys, yes." (Focus Group 5A, 2006: pg 5)

"FV3: You know, like when I feel like, when I look at myself in the mirror and I'm all done up and then I feel pretty, sensual, sexy, all those things, I think and also with interaction once again, with interactions with boys, like if I'm flirting with a guy, "You look good", you know, then that will make me feel sexy and sort of sensual, I think. It's like chemistry." (Focus Group, 2006: pg 5)

In the paragraph above, they raise the point of feeling beautiful and sensual when interacting with men. This once again speaks to heterosexuality as a site for the exploration of femininity, as their discussion on sensuality, required reading between the lines. This may have been a function of how I introduced the topic and the stage at which we were in the research process. I also encountered hesitation to this conversation, as compared to conversations on hair grooming and maintenance.

In discovering and mapping ways of performing heterosexuality, these women are expanding their own notions of femininity and negotiating its parameters. The participants made it clear that overt expressions of sexuality occurred in particular spaces, one of which being a Club. The participants spoke about their own sexuality as something that is ‘turned on and off’ depending on the environment they are in and their intention for inhabiting that space. This discussion on sexuality became personal and shifted the tone with which the participants spoke. They began engaging with sexuality as a notion deeply embedded within their own lives as opposed to something imposed upon them. In this respect, I believe Mumbi Machera’s understanding of sexuality is apt in reflecting how the participants used the term, sexuality.

“Sexuality is a complex term with a multi-faceted meaning referring to deep emotional feeling as well as to issues of power and vulnerability in gendered relationships...the scope of sexuality is socially constructed-i.e. sexual feelings and behavior are influenced and constrained by cultural definitions and prohibitions rather than by physical possibilities for sexual indulgence.” (Machera, 2004:157)

The participants discussed ‘appropriate and inappropriate’ spaces for ‘turning on’ their sexuality. As one participant describes, school is not the place to ‘turn on’ her sexuality, a more appropriate space would be a Club. In her description, she alludes to the burden of managing a space as either sexual or not as falling primarily on women.

“Participant 1: I walk into the hospital and then I have an interaction with a patient where it seemed like the patient is being, you know, not that this happens, but if it happened that



the patient suddenly felt like, 'geez, doctor, you're so hot, like gee, can I get your number?' You know, kind of thing, I'd feel like offended and unprofessional and like, geez man didn't I turn it off properly...At that time I really don't want it but when like you go to a club and then you know, you don't walk, you just, you're different. You're different and you walk in more feminine like, more like you know, aware of everything you do and you not necessarily flicking your hair and pulling strange faces or whatever but you just know that the way you look on the outside, just speaks for itself..." (Focus Group 4A, pg5-6: 2006).

Sexuality is described here through its conscious embodiment in and through the female body and as such she is responsible for policing it. The Club as expressed by the participants is a highly sexually charged space where the performance of femininity is crucial. The gaze, both masculine and feminine, scrutinizes this performance and as such women must adorn themselves in a way that meets the standards set by the collective, men and women. These standards vary across age, race and class. Popular culture and the media have heavily influenced these standards.

In preparation for the first session of participant observation I asked the women to describe the process of adorning themselves before going to the Club. I wanted to be prepared for the encounter and dress appropriately, as I am aware of the extreme power of the gaze in the space of the Club. It was moments such as these where my own embedded-ness in the research process revealed itself. Despite my own selfish desire 'to fit in', I was primarily interested in the textuality of the process of performing a particular

femininity. A performance that I have become well accustomed to and as such thought it necessary for the participants to clearly describe their own procedure and process, when performing this femininity.

“Mazuba: Okay so now going out and you want to look cute, what do you do?

Participant 3: Start with my hair

Participant 2: **The hair is the first thing. It really it dictates it's gonna, how your night is gonna be depends on how you're feeling about your hair like**

Participant: **For everyone**

Participant 2: No not how your feeling about your hair, but if your hair is crap or not. Like I want to take out my braids this weekend I need to make a plan to make sure it looks presentable if I want to go out with my friends. If I just take it out don't wash it it's not relaxed it's not nothings happening to it, I'm gonna, I'm not gonna” (Focus Group 1A, 2006: 25-26)

This conversation is key in re-iterating and demonstrating the connection between hair and other bodily performances. This portion of conversation rearticulates the sheer importance of hair grooming and the performance of a femininity as ‘presentable’, which has explicit meanings for doing hair and not allowing it to be ‘un-kept’. The response to this question inspired much of my interest in fine procedures involved in performing a ‘presentable’ femininity.

“Mazuba: Okay fine so let’s say your hair looks good which means either that you just got your braids or you’ve

Participant: You’ve just relaxed

Participant: Or you got a nice fresh weave (group laughter)

Mazuba: Okay so now let’s say things are fresh what else do you do

Participant: Um the first thing is what are you going to wear

Participant: Pants that make (group laughter) pants that make your ass look good ha ha ha” (Focus Group 1A, 2006:26)

“Mazuba: Okay so we’ve got pants that make our asses look good what else

Participant 3: Or a good pair of jeans

Participant 2: My thing is tops also

Participant: Like if you have cleavage” (Focus Group 1A, 2006:27)

“Mazuba: Okay so the jeans need to be low rise, bootleg and make your bum look cute (group yes)

Participant 3: Yeah, like I could wear and then high heels

Participant 2: Oh that is one thing with us that which well we are all learning, high heels, oh and Michaela is coming round, high heels

Participant 3: When you go out

Mazuba: Is a must?

Participant: Yeah, you’re not as glamorous you’re not as

Participant: You could be going to Varsity when you’re not wearing heels

Participant: No, you're not glamorous? No

Participant: Cause I'll wear jeans

Participant: You don't feel glamorous

Participant 4: I feel glamorous, you don't think I feel glamorous, I feel great (group laughter) and at the end of the night I can run (group laughter)

Participant 3: Shame we can run in heels

Participant 2: I can run in heels

Participant 3: I can run in heels like I'll wear jeans and a white top at that's pretty simple and if I didn't wear heels I'd look like I was

Participant 2: Going to campus

Participant 3: Sitting in my house or going to campus or going shopping

Participant 2: I wouldn't feel like I was really going out to party if I wasn't in heels, who cares if my toes are numb (group laughter) and I can't feel

Participant 3: And they give you a different posture and you like walk differently and you're just more like dressed up and you know not child like Thato (group laughter)

Mazuba: More feminine?

Group: Very feminine!" (Focus Group 1A, 2006: 33-34)

There are many dynamics at play in this portion of conversation. The procedural nature of preparing to go out which begins the process of performing femininity. The careful and meticulous ways of existing within a hegemonic discourse of beauty that prescribes particular ways of taking part in the discourse. The adage 'beauty is pain' takes form in the words of these women. It is important to note that 'hair' as an entry point-into the

discussion of ‘appropriate’ and ‘presentable’ femininity and the movements around the potential danger in ‘extreme femininity’ (running in heels). The policing that occurs amongst women to ‘protect’ and validate the constitution of this discourse is clear. I will discuss the ways femininity is policed in a later chapter. I now turn to the ways maternal influences on hairstyling practices have affected the participants’ lives. This discussion includes hair politics but also concerns issues that ramify beyond just ‘hair’.

### Maternal Influence

As has been mentioned by the participants, their mothers’ ideas on ‘good’ hair and how a young woman should do her hair, have been profoundly influential in constructing their individual ideas about hair. The conversation around their mothers’ ideas about hair was introduced by referring to the resistance encountered when one of the participants challenged their mother’s authority in influencing their hairstyle choice.

“Participant 2: My hair was lovely, I’ve never cut my hair before. Like my Mom has this thing, your hair is you know

Participant 3: Your strength

Participant 2: It’s who you are it’s, as a woman never cut your hair. Like she’s never cut her hair and it’s really long so that was my goal in life get my hair to look like my Mom’s and it just wasn’t working out. It was thin it was unhealthy. She begged me not to cause we were going to go to the salon together for um a treatment. She begged me not to and I’m like just cut it and they did and I loved it, she hated it. Like she thinks I look, she thinks, she still thinks that I look ugly with short hair.”(Focus Group 1A, 2006:4)

The notion that 'good' hair is long and beautiful and bad hair is short and ugly is clearly presented here. As discussed in the previous chapter, this ideology exists as a real form of constituting the paradigm for how beauty is conceived through hair. The participants discuss the ways their Mothers have influenced this construction. From much of the conversation it seems that the women are forging ways of being in resistance to their Mothers at points, while also internalizing the discourse on the meanings of hair influence by their Mothers. The participants' Mothers are located in very different generations and thus may have different ideals about 'modern' notions of beauty and femininity. However, in this excerpt the participant's mother clearly conveys her opinions on the meaning of hair and expects her daughter to abide by them. Research into the complex relationship between these two generations and a study into the ways femininity transforms and remains the same, would be a rich and worthwhile field of research. I think that it would provide insights into both the resistance and rebellion expressed by young women to conform to rigid notions of gendered identities. It might also accommodate for the dominant constructions of femininity reflecting the degree of sameness across generation. By asking the participants about maternal influences on hair, other issues surfaced, including negotiating meanings of respectable femininities. The next section looks at how bodily performativity of 'respectable' black femininities occur in the lives of the participants.

### Young black female respectability: What does it mean?

Much of the information I had gathered from the focus groups thus far, revolved around acceptable and reputable notions of beauty and hair. In these discussions, the women voiced their ideas around dominant meanings of beauty and femininity. Amongst these discussions were echoes of the conversation regarding sexuality and the appropriate behavior when flirting with men. This line of inquiry sparked my own thoughts on the meanings of respectable femininity for these women. I wanted to explore their understandings of respectable femininities and decipher how the term 'respectable femininity' operates in their daily lives.

The women began by drawing a distinction between their own ideas of female respectability and their parents' ideas. One participant said "In my parents' eye, is someone who like has an idea or what they want to do with their lives, who is responsible, doesn't cause a lot of like trouble at home, like their parents aren't constantly worrying. Someone who like you know, doesn't who drives, doesn't drink, doesn't do all, you know those things. Just sits at home, goes to church often, prays, learns how to clean and you know, just regularly, like girl stuff, like the general, what the ...stuff, cleaning, looks after their, like their siblings and everything else and perhaps passes at school" (Focus Group 4A, pg12: 2006).

This is a clear representation of a hegemonic notion of female respectability (Haram, 2004). Where young girls are expected to cook and clean at home, be responsible, hardworking women. Another participant added to this description and said that having

an education was highly valued by her parents. The education should be specific to professions, such as being doctor, or a lawyer or an accountant.

When the women reflected on their own notions of respectability, several ideas arose. Some focused on the fact that women should be financially independent and not have to be supported by male figures. Others commented on hygiene and the importance for women to keep themselves well groomed. One participant spoke about female respectability as having self-respect. She defined this self-respect as being linked to a respect for the body, in terms of sexuality.

“FV3: ... my opinion, is everything they said, especially the whole have respect for yourself and not just in terms of taking care of yourself in the morning and putting on lipstick, but also having respect for yourself as in when you go out, you won’t take off your top and dance topless at a bar, you know. You won’t, I don’t know, if you watched Oprah today, but you won’t sleep with 90 guys when you’re 25 years old and have slept with 90 guys, you won’t.” (Focus Group 4A, pg13:2006).

The participant has chosen to link respectability and the monitoring of sexual behavior. I think this points to another dominant construction of female respectability that says that ‘promiscuity’ or having a number of sexual partners is disrespectful behavior for women (Haram, 2004). The actual physical description of promiscuity may differ across the board but its existence is fairly standard, particularly amongst these participants.



The participants have linked notions of respectability to clothing, behaviour, and profession. A range of issues has emerged out of questions concerning negotiating hair politics. The participants have drawn on discourses of beauty, including dress, in articulating how young femininities are 'coded' and mapped onto and within political spaces. I continue to draw on these discourses in furthering my analysis of hair politics and all it entails

### Carving spaces to accommodate shifting meanings of femininities

As the amount of time I spent with the young women accumulated I began to consider the different ways they had each settled into their notions of femininity. I began to think about the processes and influences involved in creating the space to articulate a modern notion of black, middle class femininity. The conversations we had about hair and notions of beauty paved the way to uncover their individual and collective routes to a working understanding of femininity. In discussing the aesthetics of black beauty, issues around familial influences as well media and peer groups arose.

Through reflection of my own transition into being a 'young woman', I was interested in the generational shifts of what it means to be a young woman. I was concerned with the differences between how our parents conceived of young femininities and how 'young' women understood these femininities. How had these young women made those shifts, if at all shifts were made, and if so what determined their new set of values and meanings associated with womanhood. I assumed that as fourth year students these women had been grappling, consciously or not, with these issues since they arrived at university and

would have developed some working definition for where they sit most comfortably in their own femininities, particularly as university is often the most dramatic moment of “lived” freedom for young people to determine and exercise their choices.

I broached all of these issues by asking the following question; “Do you feel there is a way that you are like in Cape Town in this area that’s different to how you are with your parents (silence) like is there, can you draw a distinction between that?” (Focus Group 3A, pg 7:2006)

In response to this question all of the women expressed that they were definitely different in Cape Town, at university, than when with their parents. Each person expressed different areas in which they became more aware of themselves, a common area being drinking. Some of the women said that though their parents are aware of the fact that they drink, they do not know the extent or circumstances under which it happens. Other participants said that their parents were completely unaware of their drinking and intend on keeping it that way, implicitly implying the meanings of drinking as associated with unrespectable femininity. The women also discussed the need to self-police when with their parents. This policing occurred around the movement and display of their bodies. This included the clothes that they wore at home, the information they relayed to their parents about nightlife escapades.

“Participant 2: Drinking, like if they knew I drank I’d be going to Wits right now, I’d be at Wits. I’d live with them so they could monitor my every movement. If they knew I went out, if they knew I slept over at my boyfriend’s place, if they knew, okay they are

fine with me having a boyfriend only because he is Nigerian and so I suppose that for them makes them comfortable but yeah, things like any normal thing that a girl my age would do, my parents would see that as (whoa) wild she's just you know, too much (group laughter)" (Focus Group 3A, pg 8: 2006)

"Participant 1: ... so much more aware of my movements and you know my thing, and yeah I would tone it down if my parents said did you go out yesterday, I'd say I just went to a party I wouldn't say yeah, we went to a club you know..." (Focus Group 3A, pg 9: 2006)

"Participant 3: I'm the same, my parents know everything but they don't know the extremes to which I do it, like they know I drink they just don't know that I get drunk and pass out. They know I go out they just don't know I go out with boys and till like five o'clock in the morning" (Focus Group 3A, pg9: 2006)

The policing of identity happens to varying degrees but its occurrence is consistent. The three major arenas that call for policing, as mentioned above, are around drinking, men and body adornment, all of which have implications regarding female sexuality. All of these play a critical role in adhering to a sense of middle class respectability for young women. One of the participants spoke explicitly about having a set of clothes termed 'Sunday clothes' that she wears when meeting with her parent's friends. This is how she described them.

" Participant 3: ...they are my favorite ha ha ha, it's things like, no, no low jeans my skirts always cover my ankles ha ha ha, um no tops dipping down into my cleavage, you

know just a proper look for a girl, what, for a girl who's becoming a doctor is focused in life and is going places. That's what my parents think I am and I'm going to keep them happy..." (Focus Group 3A, pg10: 2006).

This passage speaks to the overt ways that female sexuality is conceived and policed. Wearing revealing clothing suggests a construction of femininity that is not respectable or 'proper' for 'a girl who's becoming a doctor and is focused in life'. There are definite boundaries that prescribe 'the proper look for a girl going places'. The presence of such definitions is problematic in and of itself as it confines women into gender-biased categories that neglect real forms of expression and freedom. These definitions are not new and date into many generations that have preceded us. I am most interested in how the participants reconcile the differences between their own understandings of what it means to be a young woman living in a highly sexualized popular culture where cosmopolitanism is key in asserting one's femininity. This cosmopolitanism includes expressions of sexuality through the clothes you wear and how you carry your body. This environment is juxtaposed against clearly described, perhaps conservative in comparison, notions of female respectability amongst an older generation that is removed from these particular pressures of conformity.

With this question in mind I asked the women to think about the historic moment that a shift in values between themselves and their parents occurred and how they learnt to set new boundaries that work for the lives they envision for themselves as young women.

All of the participants spoke about constructing boundaries that enabled them to exercise their personal agency while shifting away from parental control. They spoke about the shifts that occurred at different times in their lives, all of which characterized by a pushing of the independence envelope. In this conversation, they all spoke consciously about their ideas around responsibility and play and how the two can merge to construct a reality that caters to the components of their lives. Most of the participants learnt to form new values by watching their peers and by incorporating the lessons learnt from their parents that worked for their contemporary lives. The overarching theme in this discussion was the constant negotiation of values and meanings of being young and having to create a balance that enables them to pursue 'healthy' lives, as different as that may be for each of them. In terms of reconciling the different value structures between themselves and their parents, often times they simply were not able to. They seem to have resolved ways of appeasing their parents' desires while not making shifts that compromise themselves. They have created space for themselves to explore various meanings of personhood, while remaining in demarcated areas of experiment.

This chapter has covered a range of issues looking at how young black femininity is performed in various contexts. The practice of femininity was linked to areas such as hairstyling and dress. Notions of sexuality were briefly discussed through the lens of hair politics, as they relate to how young black women perform femininities. The chapter also covered maternal influences on how the participants have developed their ideas about hair as well as what spaces exist for the participants to imagine new and 'modern' femininities. Notions of 'respectability' were explored in this chapter, for there meanings

for performing femininity through body adornment, hairstyling, and ‘appropriate’ behaviour. The next chapter will examine notions of blackness and how they become contextualized, performed and understood in a South African context. The chapter will consider the ways blackness as a social, political and cultural identity is shifting in South Africa. The chapter will draw on the issues raised by the participants through their discussions on the political meanings of hairstyling and dress, and reflect on how these meanings are negotiated by young middle class women.

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## **CHAPTER 7**

### **Negotiating the meanings of Blackness**

This chapter is focused on the negotiation of blackness in post-Apartheid South Africa. This is a conversation that I have been engaging in for the past several years, looking critically at what it means to be black or African in South Africa today. Specifically what it means to be black in a context where racial identification has a long and complex political, social and economic history. Working with young women located as part of a black elite in the focus group surfaced this topic repeatedly. I argue that the concept of blackness is being redefined in South Africa although the historical and political legacy that was designed to ensure sustained poverty amongst people of colour still has powerful influence for millions of people in South Africa. Yet amidst this there is a small but growing elite few black people whose realities are comfortably lodged in middle class lifestyles. The emergence of this elite group calls for what I term a reconceptualisation of blackness. Particularly so, as we are moving into an era where economic position and political allegiance are less determining factors in the meanings of being black, than they have been historically. With shifting meanings come new understandings of the notion of blackness.

By focusing on the politics of hair, issues of race emerged in several of the focus groups. The participants were in constant dialogue about what it means to 'know how to do hair' as a black woman. The meanings of this knowledge produced much debate about

meanings of blackness in a post-Apartheid context. They also used the lens of hair to discuss how blackness, as an identity, is performed, understood and negotiated by middle class, black women. What I present in this chapter will detail the ways in which the participants engaged this conversation. Much of what I have already presented through the unpacking of 'hairstyle' choice and 'femininities' intersects with what will be covered in this chapter.

There is a particular moment in time and space that is being realized by the women I have been working with. This moment refers to the historical, cultural, political and economic position that the participants are located in. I want to show that exploring the discursive location of the young women I am researching through listening to their constructions of their bodies as performative, reveals a notion of blackness that is under threat, existing at the periphery of potential erasure. This threat can be attributed to the emergence of a black elite where definitions of race are threatened as historical and political definitions of blackness lose potency and are replaced with new struggles. The struggles are presented as a political question of identity and are juxtaposed in the participants' talk, against a playfulness and teasing amongst them in a way that reveals-despite complexities-the 'lightness' of this moment, the way in which agency, experimentation, and pleasure have become part of discourses of blackness for this group of women.

I plan on presenting the 'participants' discourses on race' by drawing on selective themes, on hair, fashion, dress and music, covered in the focus groups, as illustrating



"racialising processes" of the moment. An analysis of the 'discourses on race' will reveal theoretical engagements of notions of beauty as embedded within lived realities.

The discussion of what it means to be black arose in each of the four focus groups I conducted. These discussions were sparked by disjunctures between various perceptions of blackness amongst the participants, which resulted in conflict. The conflict also involved ideas about what actions should flow from the knowledge of black people, particularly black women, prominent amongst these was knowledge on hairstyling.

I intend discussing three main topics arising from the participants' discussions in the focus groups, which, relate to the negotiation of shifting meanings of blackness in post-Apartheid South Africa. The first is the policing of black femininity through challenging knowledges associated with black women such as hair maintenance and dress codes by black women. This was the context in which the conversation of 'racial allegiances' first emerged in the focus groups, as I will discuss shortly. The second theme is the behaviour recognizable (and expected) within a woman's life that can be defined as 'black'. The last topic concerns how class distinctions' capacity to both erase and surface the notion of race to create new spaces for black women to imagine themselves.

I begin with the policing of black femininity, as this is how the notion of blackness came into question during the focus groups. This issue arose in the first focus group conducted and permeated the discussion in the focus groups thereafter. We were discussing hair products and what had influenced the choices they made about which hair products they

used. One of the participants, Erykah, began explaining how another participant, Thato, was unfamiliar with the procedures of black hair maintenance and was expressing 'wonder' as to how Thato had managed to evade these knowledges.

Participant 3: "Thato doesn't know these things and uh, you know what was her Mother doing. She has two older sisters who are both black and she has a Mother who is black (group laughter) and she doesn't know how to..." (Focus Group 1A, pg 20:2006).

Thato then responds by 'explaining' why she had come to this age without this knowledge. She provides a justification for her 'missing', what it being referred to as inherently black women's knowledge.

Participant 4: "It's simple as I only had white friends so when you guys were plaiting your black friends' hair and learning how to plait, whose hair was I going to plait? I know how to do white people's plaits (group laughter) if they ask me I know. Don't ask me to put in braids." (Focus Group 1A, pg 20: 2006).

The conversation between the participants goes on to interrogate why Thato, even with a predominantly white group of friends, has not learnt how to do black hair. The other participants question why Thato did not learn hair maintenance practices from her Mother or sisters (quotation in above paragraphs). The participants were challenging her femininity as a black woman due to her lack of knowledge on hair maintenance. In their interrogation it becomes clear that this knowledge carries cultural and social capital in

defining one's self as a black woman and without the knowledge, with or without it being practiced, the participant is characterized as a racial anomaly. This speaks to the discreet ways that femininity is racialized but also becomes part of an 'assumed' knowledge. It also illustrates how the politics of hair can indicate negotiated meanings of blackness. In questioning Thato the participants are genuinely shocked by the idea that a young black woman could have made it to her age without knowing the 'basics' of her own hair maintenance.

As the policing of Thato's black femininity continues, she provides an explanation as to why she stopped 'oiling' her hair in High School, which further politicizes the intersections of race, 'culture' and social spaces. Thato says

Participant 4: ...“and also it's uncomfortable cause they are all white and you know how white people play with other people's hair for no reason, and when your hair is oily and people are touching it and then they look at their hands and they're like, what to do, Wow, and you're so uncomfortable, and I was actually sick of Wow, you can wipe it on my school dress, ha ha ha. I was over it and so I stopped doing it...” (Focus Group 1A, pg 21:2006).

Another participant analyses this situation further.

Participant 2: “and you don't know cause you're white and to white people oil is dirt” (Focus Group 1A, pg 22: 2006).

This dialogue is loaded with historical and colonial legacies suggesting that black people are associated with uncleanness, positioning people as then carrying the burden of proving otherwise. It also speaks to the silent and instantaneous yet politically charged ways that hair becomes a racializing feature that pronounces difference. I found this comment particularly difficult to reflect on for various reasons. Firstly, my own similar experiences that at the time occurred without real analysis or reflection but with the visceral knowledge that such an interaction carried more weight than I could embrace. Secondly, how is one, in this case Thato, to digest such an interaction? After the participants briefly discuss the discomfort experienced, the conversation continued to discuss hair products. There was no delving into the meanings and constructions of blackness vis a vis whiteness or a reflective analysis of Thato's personal experience. This is something I have experienced as a researcher, a dissertation can be premised on a single statement, yet for those who tell their stories it is a moment that comes and goes.

The policing of this particular participant is revisited in the second focus group I conducted. The discussion was around Thato "hanging out" with white people and the effects this had on her socialization. The other participants begin to question her black identity, as it is associated with particular behaviors and trends, which negotiate "hanging-out" with white people with wariness. In questioning her social identity as a black woman they her association with white people as it marks the gaps in her 'knowing black ways of being'.

Participant 3: Anything I do wrong is because I hang out with white people.

Participant 1: No

Participant 2: I think, I see it as...

Participant 3: Anything I did wrong was cause I hang out with white people

Participant 2: Yeah, we usually say that but I don't know

Participant 1: That's not really true

Participant 2: It could just be that she did it wrong (group laughter)

Participant 1: I mean like it's okay, like with the being an Oreo, inverted commas talking white whatever

Mazuba: What is being an Oreo?

Participant 1: Oh, it's sort of like you're black but you hang out with a lot of white people you're more white than you are black but on the outside you're black but on the inside you're white. Like you do white things you sound like a white person, which Thato

Participant 3: We all sound like white people

Participant 1: Thato I don't sound like you

(Focus Group 2A, pgs 4-5: 2006)

This section of the conversation highlights the negativity associated with “hanging out with white people” as a black person, though this is not expanded on to decipher what the negativity essentially concerns. I speculate that the intimate presence of white people in the participant's life is synonymously associated with a ‘dilution’ of her blackness, hence, the things she does ‘wrong’ represent the things that she does that are not ‘black’. One of the participants indicates this later in the conversation.

Participant 1: ... so when we say the things she does wrong she just doesn't do them like us, like dancing and um speaking (group laughter) (Focus Group 2A, pg5: 2006).

The policing of the participant's identity is preceded by a description of the various social determinants that prescribe a black identity. The participants begin this conversation with reference to the ways Thato's blackness has been precariously constructed.

"Participant 1: ... you know places where she like her whole first year is completely different to my first year she used to go to Springboks (a bar in Claremont) and Claremont and Tin Roof (a bar in Claremont) and all these places. The kind of music that I used to listen to, I mean she wouldn't know about Boom Shaka (group laughter) Heavy D and Soul for Real, she wouldn't know. She'd know about Bryan Adams or Aqua or Wet Wet Wet or something like that." (Focus Group 2A, pg 5: 2006)

"Mazuba: What does it mean to act black?"

Participant 2: Your mannerisms, the music you listen to

Participant 1: Your accent

Participant 2: Your accent um the way you dress, the people you hang out with, what you do for fun cause I mean we do different things sort of for fun, you know um where you go, like everything

Participant 1: dating black girls stuff like that"

(Focus Group 2A, pg 7: 2006)

These two portions of conversation highlight the various domains that prescribe blackness as a social construction beyond race, yet fundamentally rooted in racial classifications. From this conversation along with others in the focus group, it is suggested that the following aspects are signifiers of blackness, i) How one speaks, ii) Knowing how to dance to 'black' music, iii) The places one hangs out at, iv) Speaking or understanding an African language, v) One's mannerisms, vi) The way one dresses, vii) Dating black people, viii) Knowing how 'to do' black hair.

These are the general signifiers of race according to the participants. A lack of this "race" knowledge as a black woman, not only problematizes your femininity, but specifically your black femininity.

Some of these black signifiers have not been critically interrogated to explain what they would entail. For instance, the specifics of how one speaks, one's mannerisms, the way one dresses are not unpacked by the conversation. One participant made reference to white men using black South African expressions and speaking with an accent, but did not speak about how a black person 'should' speak, particularly to avoid sounding white. (Focus Group 2A, pg 7: 2006).

The way one dresses was not discussed in much depth except for a comment made by one of the participants referring to how Thato had to be taught how to dress and how to present herself in public. This dialogue points to the process and importance of grooming, which I will not be discussing in detail at present. The dialogue is another representation

of the policing of black femininity that occurs in regards to various aspects of 'beautifying'

Participant: She really, she really was white

Participant 2: ... you know how white girls can go out in slops and not mind

Participant: And tracksuit pants and be okay

Participant 3: And then on top of it her hair wouldn't be well like a white person's would do so she'd she'd have this great hair in inverted commas and then and then then like she'd look hot as well but she'd be wearing tracksuit pants and then she'd be wearing great tracksuit pants and slops out at night

Participant 2: She really

Participant 3: Which I mean was cool

Participant 2: In her life she believed she was a white girl who could just

Participant 4: Wear anything

Participant 2: Wear anything out

Participant: Wear anything out that she liked out

Participant 4: Yeah, yeah I can't even say no

Participant 3: I used to like she'd come dressed a certain way and we're all ready to go out and I'd be like Thato I think you should wear this and then like give her something of my own ha ha ha, or something that would

Participant 4: And when she said this it wasn't like a new top or (group laughter)

Participant 3: And then I'd sit her down and fix her hair or whatever ha ha ha that's what would happen with Thato



Participant 2: And now she's grown up, she can dress herself now

Participant: Mmm, she can buy clothes by herself, very good and we're very proud of that.

(Focus Group 1A, pgs 31-32: 2006).

There are several dynamics at play in this section of the focus group, namely, the notion of dress as being reflective of particular racial groups; the policing of femininity through challenging a black identity; the performativity of femininity as it relates to the body and hair adornment. The first two are directly related to the theme being discussed in this text. As has been mentioned throughout this discussion, the policing of black femininity has been directly linked to the negotiating of blackness as an identity. The one participant's identity as a black woman has been continuously challenged and negotiated throughout the three focus groups from which I have sourced much of the information presented here. Her identity as a black woman has been challenged on the basis that her behavior, and knowledge about, what the participants deem valuable information- the ways in which blackness relates to femininity - have not been in alignment to a 'popular' and social understanding of blackness.

As a solely racial classification, the participant's blackness is never questioned. The notion that blackness is a socially constructed identity with particular knowledges, practices and procedures becomes evident when analyzing the often overt criticism placed on 'how a black girl should be and not be'. This notion is further problematized and to some degree justified when the idea of social class is inserted into the analysis of

the meanings of blackness. This takes place in the discussion on magazines and the lifestyle prescribed by *Cosmopolitan* a contemporary magazine aimed at high-middle level female market about living “cosmopolitan” lives.

A dynamic and fruitful discussion takes place amongst the participants as they partake in a critical analysis of what they have named, the “Cosmo girl”. They had mentioned in conversation prior to the third focus group that some of them read *Cosmopolitan*, and so I was interested in who reads it, why, and what influence does it have on their thoughts about beauty, hairstyling and fashion. Upon asking this question, one of the participants explained that she read the magazine (“Cosmo”), primarily because of the lifestyle it created, embodied by the “Cosmo girl”.

Participant 3: ...why do I buy Cosmo, uh, they make Cosmo like a lifestyle you know you buy the magazine and you drink the drink and you then you’re like the Cosmo girl...

Participant 3: ... The Cosmo girl has like almost has everything and is in control of everything because you know cause Cosmo tells you how to know what you’re thinking all the time, how to decide where he is taking you on a date why he’s taking you there, like what people are thinking about you when you walk down the street cause they already told you the cool jeans to wear that are going to make people think wow, so like they almost make you feel like you control the universe and the world is spinning around you ... then it’s also it’s a lifestyle cause they have all the cool places to go although I’ll never go there, but even if it’s a crap place I’ll go just to say oh Cosmo said it was nice

even but I really didn't enjoy it, but the other place Cosmo said to go like I've been to and you know it was awesome and I've tasted that drink and you know I've tried that diet or whatever cause it's such a like so many people do it and everyone knows like like it's like it's almost in any conversation with girls there will be another girl who reads the Cosmo.

(Focus Group, 3A, pg 17-18: 2006).

The participant provides a description of a lifestyle I instantly understand and recognize. She describes an image that I have known *Cosmopolitan* to produce. I envisioned a hip and trendy club in Cape Town when she spoke of the places to go and I pictured a young woman standing at the bar ordering a Mojito or a *Cosmopolitan*, wearing pointy shoes, skin tight jeans, a trendy top (which could include a variety of designs, but importantly, from a designer shop), carrying a small designer bag, ready for a night out. In my opinion this image as the magazine depicts it is of a young white woman. I then asked the participants, if they thought the "Cosmo girl" was white. This launched a discussion on which magazines are targeted at black people and at white people. They critiqued the suggestion that *Cosmopolitan* does not target a particular race, but rather a lifestyle that has been associated with whiteness but is shifting to include women of colour. It is this point that raises the question of a shifting notion of blackness, as an emerging elite redefining what it means to be black within the parameters of middle-class fashion.

The conversation amongst the women went on to interrogate what it means to target a magazine exclusively at white or black people. They discussed lifestyles that have been

attributed to whiteness but are becoming more inclusive of other races through class accessibility. They also debated how class accessibility does not deter from a magazine being targeted at a specific race. This is where the intersection and separation of race and class becomes overt.

“Participant 2: I think it’s I don’t know. I don’t think Tru Love is for Blacks and Cosmo is for Whites. I think Tru Love is for old women, grown women and Cosmo is for younger, hipper, more with it girls.

Participant 2: No Y Mag is just (inaudible conversation) I disagree like when she was talking about the Cosmo girl I didn’t picture a white girl I pictured you know, a Black, Indian, White, Coloured you know any girl that’s cool like, that you know, like a Cosmo girl, because you know there is no other Black, there is no other magazine for young, with it ladies for the Black race, so all young Black girls who are with it, cool and hip and chic and drink the drinks go, to the places, all read Cosmo so in my head it wasn’t...

Participant 3: Okay, but how would you feel if there was a magazine for, if there was a magazine that was Cosmo but always had black people in front and more about like, you know Cosmo has never featured Pata Pata (a Cape Town hip-hop, funk, African music club) as a place to go but they’ll have crap places like Marvel (a bar located on Long Street), like if there was, don’t you think that the only reason that other people of color are reading Cosmo is because there is nothing else and if there was something then they would”

(Focus Group 3A, pg18-19:2006)

This paragraph captures two important ideas. Namely, the idea that *Cosmopolitan* appeals to a lifestyle separable from race. Secondly, the gap in the market for magazines that are aimed at young, “hip” and “trendy” Black women. The idea that *Cosmopolitan* can target a lifestyle that has no racial implications is emphasized in this paragraph. This speaks to the space that is opening up for young black women to inhabit middle class lifestyles, and also shape the meanings of class in South Africa. Yet, as is debated in this paragraph, the cosmopolitan middle class lifestyle as depicted by Cosmo, is still predominantly white orientated. The conversation goes on to negotiate these issues and others.

“Participant 1: Cosmo’s not a black, and it’s not made for white people. The Cosmo girl is not white, because, (picks up the magazine to make reference to it) just because, okay she’s white but Cosmo covers everyone in here like it doesn’t have a page which is just like when it shows you make up they put one page black, one page

Participant 3: Yeah, they do put but like...

Participant 4: ...Sorry, my turn, um what I wanted to say was okay when I think of the Cosmo girl I don’t see, I just picture someone who has long flowing hair that’s always in places, like she looks pretty, like generally white people have long flowing hair, like I think, when I think of the Cosmo girl, yes I think of a white girl but in my mind I don’t see any reason why like I can’t be like any of the girls in the Cosmo magazine...

Participant 2: ...the Cosmo girl is not a white girl um true, there are more white girls like that than there are black girls, but if you go to Joburg and you look at a Sandton black girl

and a Sandton white girl, the only thing different about them is their skin colour. They both have long flowing hair, they both go to the same places.” (Focus Group 3A, pg19-20:2006)

I chose these snippets of conversation to highlight the contention amongst the participants and view the different perspectives on the issue. The participants were clearly divided on the issue of *Cosmopolitan's* target group. Some strongly believed that it is indeed targeted at white women, but that that did not exclude black women, particularly those who are able to consume the image and lifestyle created by the magazine. Others felt that *Cosmopolitan* did not in fact target any particular racial group, but rather a class bracket. Another participant highlighted that this class bracket is predominantly white dominated in South Africa, therefore even when targeting a class bracket, by virtue of definite relationship between race and class in South Africa, inevitably race becomes an integral factor.

The notion of racial erasure becomes evident in the last paragraph quoted. Sandton is used as a marker for wealth and middle/upper class standing in this context. When referring to two women, both ‘Sandton girls’, a class affiliation is implied. With the emergence of a black elite comes the potential erasure of race as being a marker for difference in class. Class becomes a new means for differentiating between meanings of people’s lifestyles. This is what the participants are essentially debating-- to what degree class affiliation can buy one space and authority into a world that was previously exclusive of them. This has serious implications for negotiating bodily performances.

How one chooses to perform the body and what authority is taken/given for this performance. The body as marked by class and race, negotiates the tensions of discursive practices of femininity.

When I introduced this discussion I did not foresee the depth it would go into or the visceral reaction it would induce in the participants. I think this conversation is an indication of crude intersections between race and class in South Africa. This intersection is being demonstrated through a focus on popular culture (via *Cosmopolitan* Magazine here), which suggests the levels at which a social and political moment has penetrated the lives of young people in South Africa. This debate is particular to South Africa today as it speaks to the political transformation that has taken place and the vast spaces that transformation is yet to occur. The women in this research project have provided a lens with which to critically look at how gender, race and class are taking shape in the lives of people who are located various points in a power hierarchy. Their multiple identities allow them access into a consumer dominated world, while simultaneously, barring them access to constructions of femininity and race that do not take into account their multiple localities.

## CHAPTER 8

### Popular Culture and Globalization

I wanted to dedicate a chapter to the ways that popular culture and globalization emerged as powerful influences in the lives of my participants as young urban affluent women, through their “talk” about the politics of body performance, using hair as an entry point into an array of daily negotiations with embodied identity. I present this chapter with caution, as material ‘opened’ up primarily by the participants. I have not provided strong theoretical grounding for this chapter, thus raise the issues here as ‘preliminary’ discussion into concerns by the participants. I recognize the limitations of this chapter and proceed tentatively in the analysis.

This chapter will discuss the ways popular culture has influenced the participants’ notions of beauty and femininity. A brief analysis of the ways popular culture creates ‘aspirational’ lifestyles will be covered in this chapter. The chapter will conclude with a look at how the participants are negotiating their multiple subject locations through discourses on the meanings of being, “young”, “modern”, African women.

Throughout the research process they constantly made reference to and utilized contemporary popular culture ‘icons’. These icons were spoken about in an aspirational sense and they were consistently American and predominantly African American. I observed a discourse of cosmopolitanism amongst the participants that drew heavily on



these icons, producing a world for themselves that prescribes a lifestyle that is imagined upon the representations of these icons. This world is embedded in a consumer culture accessible through commodification, as such it has implications for the political economy of beauty.

I think that it is important to examine how young black women in South Africa are constructing their gendered identities. I am deeply interested in how a growing discourse and practice of consumerism is creating particular images and notions of young black femininity in post-Apartheid South Africa. With the emergent growth of this popular discourse, how are young black women negotiating and reinventing their identity through a consumer culture. As a young black woman in post-Apartheid South Africa, I have become increasingly aware of a dominant consumer culture that predicts and inscribes ways in which I am to be gendered as a woman. This process occurs across spaces through various mediums, each pertaining to a discourse that assumes to understand the complexity of gendered identities. I am an active participant in a consumer culture where, I watch and consume television shows, commercials and the radio, which are constantly producing images of young black female identity. The production of these images prescribes what one should wear, where one should shop, where one should “hang out”, what “hanging-out” should involve. I have found myself questioning and interrogating the meanings of these images and the subsequent lives they imagine. I am fascinated in how this culture has infiltrated my own notions of identity. The images I refer to range from an ‘Always’, Sanitary towels commercial displaying a group of young black women at a party. There is one woman feeling insecure because she is on her period and is thus

unable to dance confidently with her man. At which point another woman offers her an 'Always' pad, which she uses and emerges with a revitalized sense of security and can then go claim her man from the clutches of another preying young woman.

Another example is a 'Sunsilk' commercial showing a young black woman 'ashamedly' using a hairpiece because her hair is breaking. A friend then introduces her to 'Sunsilk' products, which she uses and can now walk with poise and tosses the hairpiece out. This commercial ties up with the images of black beauty and femininity, as a prescription for how to look attractive. I feel that often these images are dubiously linked to what I imagine as representing black female identity, yet as an avid subscriber to this consumer culture, I find gaps between the realities and representations. This contradiction has sourced a personal inquiry into how I am becoming gendered, particularly as a young black woman. I have undergone and am engaging in the negotiation of my gendered identity, paving a way to critically understand my own subjectivity.

My own 'thinking' on commodified 'successful' black femininities has sparked an interest in 'reading' the participants' opinions on the matter. The material on popular constructions of beauty clearly presented itself throughout the focus groups and as such I chose to 'unpack' some of the meanings and tensions discussed. The participants discuss what I have termed an African cosmopolitanism that locates them powerfully as urban youth who are creating new ways of being African and cosmopolitan. They discuss the various ways they are negotiating their multiple identities and meanings of various

geopolitical locations. This chapter aims at looking at the various forms that popular culture is articulated and reproduced in the lives of the participants.

### ‘Balling out of Control’

Young people are presented with various mediums with which to interact with popular culture, ranging from television programs such as MTV (an international music channel), MTV Base, international sitcoms, movies, magazines, advertisements. There is a program on DSTV, called E. This channel is solely dedicated to the happenings of international celebrities. This ranges from coverage of the major movie/television awards to the ‘True Hollywood Stories’ of celebrities. Having DSTV speaks to economic class, which necessarily acts as inclusive of some and exclusive of many, particularly in South Africa.

All of these instruments are bombarded with imagery that cultivates the desire to be youthful, glamorous, attractive, famous and wealthy. E has programs such as ‘how to be like Keira Knightly’, which is a top ten for the ways to emulate this actress’s life. The participants have a term for this lifestyle, they call it ‘balling out of control’, which means living a ‘superstar’ lifestyle. ‘Balling out of control’ is a term that originates from hip-hop culture. The participants describe this lifestyle in the first focus group when I ask them what it means to ‘ball out of control’.

“Participant 1: You’re just spending, you’re living the good life, you’re acting like (much conversation)

Participant 2: You’re acting like you’re rich, man, you’re acting like there’s ... (much conversation) behind you following you

Participant: Yeah, yeah

Participant 2: You look good, feel good, you look different from everyone

Participant 4: Everyone is looking at you

Participant 2: People look envious

Participant 4: And yeah like you're like yeah, it's me

Participant 2: Like someone could walk up to you at any minute and ask for your autograph..." (Focus Group 1A, pg25: 2006)

From this portion of conversation, it is clear that this lifestyle requires a high degree of exclusivity that is able to buy one a rather grotesque but desirable fan base. It is in the gaze that this lifestyle is valorized. A hierarchy of desire creates the envy that is referred to in this conversation. The class implications are inherent in the way the women conceptualize this lifestyle. It is class as it refers to economic capability as opposed to a sense of taste or particular preferences. These women are positioned in a class structure that allows them to in fact 'ball out of control'. 'Balling' has its limits and is not a lifestyle that the women inhabit as a norm, but are able to access at certain times, the life of 'balling'. This image of 'balling out of control' is born from representations on music videos that are shown on channels such as MTV. This is a lifestyle depicted as glamorous and appeals to a generation that has come to value a life marked by copious amounts of money and fame, through programs such as "The Fabulous Life Of..."

"Participant 1: ... you know people trying to live like super stars (group laughter) when they go out because you see in the music videos people are like balling when they go out,

when we have big nights and I'll spend but the thing is I am not earning like a million a second (group laughter) (conversation I couldn't hear). It's the same thing like you know when they show on Fabulous life of, they show these hair salons where people are getting their hair done for like 5000 pounds or whatever and yeah that was the Hair Images" (Focus Group 1A, 2006:24)

'The Fabulous Life Of' is a television program showing the wealth and opulence of various celebrities. Its primary purpose is to illustrate how wealthy the celebrity is and how they chose to spend their money. Hair Images is a hair salon in Sandton. It is known as an up market salon that caters to 'the who's who' of Sandton and surrounding areas. The comparison made by the participant is interesting as it shows a local example of a 'global' construction, in this case, 'balling out of control'. This example also serves to locate the participants within the local construction of wealth and opulence as this is a hair salon that some of the participants used to frequent.

#### Using global/modern femininities in the production of young black femininities

The appropriation of global/modern femininities occurs through this popular discourse, colloquially termed 'the MTV generation'. It is through global/modern femininities that the participants produce and reproduce ways of being young black women. Through conversations with the women, it became evident that they were drawing heavily on global/modern femininities, predominantly African American women, for their own constructions of a modern black femininity. I wanted to examine the use of this model

and the ways it reproduces particular black femininities. This is a theme that I observed throughout the research project emerging within each focus group. One of the participants makes reference to the desirability of these modern icons.

Participant 3: ...you want to be like Beyonce, shaking your hair like ooh booty shake, with you hair do (group laughter) yeah, yeah. Aaliyah's hair was a weave, but do we all know, we didn't know. We just saw the two colours at the end (group laughter) And we want to be Aaliyah. Didn't we all want to be like Aaliyah with the really fine hair?

Participant 2: Definitely, it's the media.

Participant: Yeah, definitely we all wanted hair like that" (Focus Group 1A, 2006:9).

This speaks to images within popular culture as constructing new ways of being black and beautiful. As the focus groups will reveal as the story unfolds, there is a dominant focus on African American popular culture as it influences these women's lives and provides ways for being young black and cosmopolitan, particularly in a context where this identity is finding new means for expression.

This is a classic example of how the global/modern femininities function as icons that the women, literally or figuratively, 'wanted to be'. I think it is important to ask what these images entail and what makes them desirable for young women. Beyonce and Aaliyah represent the dominant images of beauty and success in a popular discourse. Beyonce is a young black female musician. She represents an image of beauty that reflects wealth, a beauty that is articulated through light skin, a curveous yet well toned body and her long

straight hair. The “booty shake” is a growing wave of contemporary dance culture. In many of her music videos she does the ‘booty shake’, which is as the name states, shaking of the “bum”. The ‘booty shake’ was assimilated into popular culture through her album ‘Bootylicious’, which has played an instrumental role in creating the “bum” as a sexy, attractive and highly desirable asset for black women.

Aaliyah represents a slightly different image. When she entered the music scene in the early 90’s, she had long straight hair, but her attire created an alternative way of being feminine. She wore baggy jeans with visible boxer shorts and crop tops. Her image changed over the years to resemble the dominant image of young black female artists, but the beginning of her career marked an era for beauty in youth culture. Both of these women represent black beauty in contemporary popular culture. There are many other women who share this representation and others who provide alternative meanings of beauty. There are several other artists such as Erykah Badu,, Lauryn Hill or Jill Scott, who all provide alternative constructions of beauty but within a dominant discourse. Their subversion, if one may call it that, is represented perhaps through their music or attire. Yet their inscription into a hegemonic notion of beauty occurs at key levels: their bodies are still adorned to present tight, ‘fashionable’ clothing or heavily made up faces. Jill Scott’s supposed subversion is represented by the fact that she is not a thin musician but her lyrics still speak to the idea of women being sites of pleasure and eroticism for men.

Within an ‘MTV generation’ these representations of beauty carry social capital. Aligning yourself with these notions of beauty deems you attractive and within a

predominantly heterosexual context allows you the capital to be desirable. In my conversations with the participants we did not analyze the meanings of this social capital yet they reflected on the currency the dominant images carry.

The growing representation of ‘the bum’ as a site of desire is referred to further on in the focus group. They discuss what it means to have a ‘cute bum’. The participants comment on another female musician in relation to ‘the bum’.

“Mazuba: What does, what does it look like if your ass looks good

Participant 1: Like it looks cute

Participant: Like my jeans look

Participant: Like Mandisa today looks good in these jeans

Participant: like it rounds her ass (much conversation couldn’t hear)

Participant: ...it’s not in everyone’s face it’s just there and it’s just enough

Participant: Perky

Participant: Looks like Kylie Minogue’s ass in that video “I can’t get you out of my head”

Participant 2: I always just think it looks like I want to pinch it I’d love to walk up to

Participant 3: If you see it you just wanna pinch the ass and that’s when you say these pants are working” (Focus Group 1A, 2006:26).

The women go on to describe what they have termed the ‘bum wiggle’. When purchasing pants, doing the ‘bum wiggle’ is a way of testing whether the pants are flattering or not.



The women contextualize this discourse, by explaining how music videos are a site for the reproduction of an increased desire in the bum.

“Participant 4: But I don’t have an ass yoh, it sucks it’s tough for me so I have, my pants have to give me a bum so if I do my bum wiggle (group laughter) then I’m not gonna buy them.

Mazuba: Okay, what’s the bum wiggle?

Participant 3: You shake your booty

Participant 5: You stand up, mirror is behind you and then you shake it (group laughter) and then you look and when you look if you’re like aah that’s good then you’re like yes to the pants and then you’re like

Participant 1: Eh Angazi as well when (group yeah, laughter, unclear conversation)

Participant: That’s how I decide, before you buy them

Mazuba: So, music videos I need to start watching

Participant: That’s why

Participant: We get most of our inspiration from music videos

Participant: Lots of music videos start with someone’s bum shaking

Participant: Yeah

Participant: ... and it ... for free ha ha (group laughter)

Participant 4: And if now I’m gonna now try and do this without a bum (group laughter) living a music video life without a bum (group laughter) I try to create the bum that I don’t have” (Focus Group 1A, 2006:30-31)

This passage raises critical issues for the construction of beauty for young black women. One is the sheer magnitude of needing to be a part of this dominant construction of beauty. What does it mean to not 'have a bum' and then to deploy strategies employed to manage this lack? The colonial history of exoticising black women's bodies, namely "the bum", echoes as a counter narrative in this discourse (hooks, 1992). A number of questions flow from this theme: how to theorize the role the music video play in constantly reproducing and valorizing these images? What of whether this construction of "bum" beauty creates agency for these women or merely reconstitutes oppressive patriarchal representations of women? These are all questions that require further analysis for the possible knowledge they will produce for understanding young, black femininities.

#### African Cosmopolitanism: Negotiating Multiple Identities

The participants are multiply located. Two of the participants identify as non-South African. Michaela was born in South Africa, but locates herself as Ugandan due to her family's heritage as Ugandan. Erykah has never lived in Nigeria but claims a Nigerian identity. Amani, Mandisa, and Thato inhabit multiple locations in the form of their movements across class spaces. These three women spent the early parts of their lives living in diversely located townships and moved into the suburbs around the same time South Africa was born as a democracy. I will not discuss the spatial meanings of class as it relates to multiple identities in this context. I think that that discussion requires a historical excavation into the meanings of space in Apartheid South Africa. Due to time constraints and the scope of this project, that analysis will not take place. I do however

recognize the importance of mapping this history as a way of deepening the understanding of ways of conceptualizing class and race in post-Apartheid South Africa.

As young urban African women they are in the process of creating an African cosmopolitanism. They are contemplating what it means to be African and cosmopolitan in an era where this is a location that is in construction. This construction emerges out of 'the moment' described earlier in the text. They are creating their identities and subjectivities in a space that is new to the meanings of an African cosmopolitan in a post-Apartheid setting. South Africa has had a rich history as being a location for strong political activism and a buzz told through the narratives of people living through the 1950's and 1960's South Africa. "That was at the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960's. Official Apartheid was ten years old, and growing shrewder by the day. But the writers and photographers of *Drum*, and the readers who lapped up their words and images, seemed to behave as if anything was still possible. They carried themselves with an absurd confidence, as if that drunken wave of freedom that already pounding across the north and west and the east of the continent would soon be lapping against the shores of South Africa" (Chapman: 2001:vii).

Being in South Africa locates these women powerfully in a cosmopolitan centre in relation to the African continent. The major cities of South Africa are akin to major international cities. Due to our history, there are severe implications about who resides in particular spaces. John Western looks more closely at the meanings of space in Cape

Town and how institutional Apartheid has constructions meanings for space, race and class. (Western, 1996)

The participants introduce this conversation in their debate about the Cosmopolitan magazine. They raise some interesting points about the meanings of being black and living a cosmopolitan life and how that is performed.

“Participant 2: ...you’ll get two girls, two Sandton girls one black one white and they are exactly the same the only difference is their skin colour. The black girl is not trying to be white she’s just trying to be cool and chic and with it and so is the white girl, but not trying to be white. Wearing jeans that cost, wearing nice jeans that are in fashion is not trying to be white is trying to be cool do you know what I mean so

Participant 1: So are you saying that white people are cool and we’re not?

Participant 3: No, I’m trying to say that white people are cool ... (I think she said that Cosmo is targeted at white people predominantly)

Participant 2: I think Cosmo is targeted, no okay it’s a bigger market (People speaking on top of each other, so some voices were lost)” (Focus Group 3A, 2006:20).

This passage points to the contradictory aspect of being both black and as she describes being ‘cool and chic and with it’. ‘Being with it’ has been associated with whiteness. So how do they reimagine the space for being Black and cosmopolitan. Is it a matter of deconstructing these spaces or merely including themselves in the space and dealing with the consequences of being challenged on their ‘African-ness’. The meanings of ‘being

with it' also need to be deconstructed and analyzed to examine what it means for these women 'to be with it'.

I have included a poem about the contradictions and negotiations of being young and African in South Africa today. This poet tells of her own struggles with negotiating multiple identities through poetic verse. The intention is to give voice to young peoples negotiations and reflect on their relevance to how young women are constructing their subjectivities.

### **I stand between my Africa and me**

I once did an interview and the headline read Botswana Born beauty,  
Pride beamed inside me despite the fact that I was born in Durban actually, but lets  
overlook that, it's just a slight technicality,  
I can feel I'm at home as soon as I've crossed Tlokweng border posts and I'm welcomed  
by the nasal Dumelang of a lazy customs official  
Thinking of it now I miss home I don't go back often though, only on special occasions,  
this time stamped as a South African citizen.  
U know what I've always thought as I'm filling out forms it's a pity they don't have  
SADC as a nationality,  
it would certainly make my life easy,  
with my half Ndebele aunts and uncles I'd just write "from all of the above" next to  
country of origin  
My life would be simple  
I wouldn't have to launch into a recited summary of my personal history when asked So  
where are you from?

Oh no My mom, zulu born went into exile and married a motswana man my dad, 11 years and three kids later they divorced, we came back got SA passports, and had to transform,

Issues of identity became blessings of diversity interesting stories and a collage of poetic childhood memories

I remember the dust rising streets of scorching hot gaborone, we grew up catching raindrops in orange plastic jugs,

Our tiny feet would thomp heavily on the ground in a rain dance, it wasn't just for fun but necessity,

Seriously, we were so thirsty, two savannahs short of a drought, yes that's how I'd describe my home city

But we survived and felt vibrantly alive in my desert home that I deserted a long time ago

The motswana in me comes through in my laid back sticky pap and morogo attitude ga oka mpona ke rapame mo stoeping osekwa wanthwenya thlemma kea ithetsa as batswana do,

Mangifuna godwa nginga khuluma isizulu and that is respectfully due to umama's bed time stories which she beat into our hearts like a steady drum, always ending too soon in ncos ncos yaphela, we were still too young, to see that she preserved our mother tongue

I have ancestors all over the show.

bloodlines spilling across borderposts,

I have a cousin mazuba who I'm so close to she's from zambia,

That didn't prevent blood wars fought with family members right next door in Zimbabwe, There's more I even have heritage in Kenya apparently!

Its funny a friend once told me, after we had just met, her name is Awino, she smiled and said,

You know mbali, you have the pride and nature of a Luwo, She told me that mbali isn't a flower it means far in Swahili it moved me, in a way I can't explain because far is how I feel

I am running so hard cutting across geographical invisible lines to stay safe inside the right one, ie the one that's convenient at the time

I the nouveau African, I wear dresses hand made and mailed by a friend from mali,

I deshell prawns with my Mozambican friends as we engage in debate about third world poverty

I say bonjour ca va to parking guards laugh and ask will they vote Kabila, if they can, get back to the DRC,

In the meantime I'm calculating where to say I'm from to whom, to seem closer to them to feel more African, without being too true about my family lineage,

turns out my gogo is from the wrong type of zimbo, so I hide that, and emphasize my new found Eritrean friend,

playing it easy meanwhile I'm seriously worried, the thought running thru my mind is like what if I end up with some guy from Nigeria

I am xenophobia...

I am Africa not African condemning instead of celebrating my diversity. I am the new face of Africa, cutting my nose to spite my face. I am the hutu calling myself tutsi in conflict with my shared heritage, instead of opening my eyes and seeing that I am self colonized

In my African fantasy I stand in the shade of a baobab tree its smell seeps through the black and protrudes through the juice of a morula perfectly,

only thing wrong with this picture is that no one speaks 'african' in the restaurants I frequent this new found revolution is recent,

Truth is the who I am, is a cape town city girl consuming what is termed the coca cola culture, you can feel it, it's in the long street fever where we merge on a level where we can all relate because we've all bought shares in this new south Africa

We're part of a culture that sells that all is well we have mixed raced international friends but that cosmo city ends in the CBD. fifteen minutes out of town there's a war going didn't you read the headlines of murdered somailians. Africans killing each other what,

what next? come on it's ridiculous we don't need xenophobia what with race class issues and HIV we can sustain our hate for each other for at least another century.

It's a fear what we don't understand mentality it has to stop!

go back home you refugee, because we choose to forget a time when we too weren't free, we are shouting makwere kwere take our jobs, because we have millions unemployed, it's the foreigners who sells drugs, because we need to blame others for what we have destroyed

Me included I am struggling to choose sides because I want to be seen in my stoned cherrie outfit as the one of us of the African renaissance

Shouting proudly African silently, because I don't want to be teased that I'm from upper campus, running panting ten years later after pass laws holding my green id book up.

I want to stop, pause sink my bare feet into red African soil, trace my blood line with my big toe, create a map no matter how far back of my people, and find my roots so I can stand.

Dream of an Africa I claim as mine, I will fight for this continent with fierce pride because it is only I that stands between my Africa and me.

### **Mbali Kgosidintsi 2006**

This poem gives voice to many of the tensions involved in being multiply located both geographically and socio-politically. Many of these tensions are discussed briefly in the focus groups, yet not to as much detail and reflection. I hope to voice them here as they play an important part in locating the participants' geo-politically.

This chapter has attempted to evaluate some of the critical "moments" in the focus groups that articulated issues concerning popular culture and its affects on beauty and hair politics. The chapter has looked at the 'aspirational' lifestyles discussed by the



participants and how these lifestyles take shape in a local context. I considered the influence of global femininities in providing images for the participants to draw on in constructing their ideas of 'attractive' and 'desirable' femininities. These influences have been most effective in providing a standard for 'suitable' hairstyles and dress codes. The participants make use of 'global femininities' in mapping their own bodily performativity in a local context. Lastly, this chapter dealt with the ways the participants have negotiated their own multiple localities and the meanings this has had for their lives. Inhabiting a body with multiple "home" locations has had an impact on conceiving, performing and understanding femininities.

## CHAPTER 10

### Concluding Remarks

This dissertation has been a collective, exploratory work in progress. I have rooted much of the analysis on the narratives of the participants. As a result one could say that this has been research mapping the narratives of black middle class women as they produce, deconstruct and reimagine ways of understanding their subject positions. It was initially my intention to evaluate the hair politics of black women as it relates to intersections of race, class and gender. I hope that I have provided a framework to continue thinking about the multiple ways beauty as a constructed ideology is reproduced amongst young women.

Having conducted the research, the use of hair politics as a lens through which we may begin to uncover and surface the incredibly nuanced and often contentious ways that young black middle class women experience these subjectivities proved a fruitful and dynamic process. The politics of hair provided insight into the bodily performances negotiated at the intersections of race, class and gender. The discussions on hair, operating as a lens has produced certain kinds of new knowledges particularly for the scholarly work of African feminism. Firstly, the claim that hair matters in the lives of young black women has been unequivocally held as a standpoint. The importance of hair has been declared, expressed and debated consistently during the research and in relation to various topics, from hair grooming and maintenance, to conversations on the policing and embodying of femininity.

The next claim I argued is that the constructions of beauty carry discursive and political meanings for how young black women perform and embody notions of femininity. As the research has shown beauty is being envisioned through strict, hegemonic ideologies of a dominant discourses. Existing outside of this discourse has been necessarily conceived as “resistance”. With this in mind, what spaces are there to re-envision this construction and it’s relevance for black femininities? One of the primary reasons I chose to explore this topic was to begin to create spaces where a broader notion of femininity could exist. I am concerned with pushing the boundaries that are continuously being marked, to allow for integrated and fluid notions of black, African femininities. I am weary of discourses that prescribe particular ideologies of beauty as I imagine them to be restrictive. Having worked with the participants, it is clear that this imagining is not necessarily how they interact with this these discourses.

Somewhere in the midst of doing my research, I began to think about why this topic was of interest to me. This process began by me considering the ways that black women are represented in the media. That topic then transformed itself into where I am today, looking at hair politics. When the participants were speaking about the influence their mothers have had on how they do their hair and their views and opinions of hair, I started thinking about how that realm of influence was vacant for me. Having not had a motherly figure in my life from the age of thirteen, the process of adolescence and becoming a teenage girl occurred with different influences to what the girls had experienced. Much of my transition into adolescence then an adult notion of femininity occurred with the

influence of a man, my father. Hair styling were essentially my own choice, there was no one steering the way. The process of “coming into” my femininity was inconspicuously guided by my father but most remarkably transpired through my own understandings of the things around me. There were guiding factors such as friends, female relatives and television all of which have played their own role in aiding me to write the script I was to follow into the murky waters of becoming a young black woman.

As much of the research I am conducted occurred as a reflexive process, it has given me the opportunity to reflect critically on this process. Hair has never carried much capital in my understanding of femininity. I established my own assumptions about hair and what was desirable. I knew that having long hair was desirable. ‘Hair that was Relaxed was the ideal’, ‘Cornrows made you look cute’, ‘Dreadlocks were viewed as a asserting a subversive femininity’ until they became a fashion symbol, and ‘cutting hair short was unfeminine’. These ideas were clear to me from an early age. I was aware of some of the dominant hair ideologies that have come to shape how young black women understand hair and their femininity. Although even with this awareness, there was no immediate pressure about what hairstyle I should do, or what represented femininity or not.

Long nails, make-up, long hair, none of these were things I favored. Did that compromise my femininity? I do not know. I find that it has left me in a strange place concerning the performance of my femininity. I do not have long nails, I do not wear make-up and my hair is short, what does that mean about my femininity? Where do I place myself within this study? I would not say that I am engaging in a subversive expression of femininity as

I subscribe to other performances of a dominant discourse of femininity. I wear tight jeans, because I know it is fashionable and thus presentable in the contemporary and cosmopolitan life I live. When the occasion calls for it I can present myself as the poster girl for Woolworths, a drooping top, tight jeans, high heels, ear rings etc... Surely this is not the depth of my femininity, the way I adorn my body? Yet what I seem to have uncovered through this research is the inextricable connection between femininity as a bodily performance embedded in discourses on race and class cultures.

I have no doubt there are 'new' productions of black femininity occurring in South Africa today. Yet there are still dominant productions of beauty. For instance, to be beautiful as a black woman, you can be light and thin, or not too dark, or have a big "bum". These variations are exports from producers that do not have our best interest at heart. What would it look like if we were to expand our understanding of beauty? What would it take for me and other black women to go to a club wearing something comfortable, without the pressure of having to fit into a mould? This brings me back to a point that the literature seems to make repeatedly, being attractive or beauty holds social capital because it plays a large role in being desirable to the opposite sex, presumably that is what we all want. Once again femininity is being defined in relation to a force that dictates what it should look like. We need a reclaiming of our femininities.

The next important claim is that constructions of hair and beauty can provide insights into the meanings of race, class and gender. This has occurred at numerous moments during the research process and through specific dialogues on how black femininity is policed,

performed and envisioned. There is far more research to be done on conceptualizing blackness as it relates to femininity. I trust that the work here presents new ways of thinking about the relationship between race, class and gender.

I have utilized the epistemological and methodological standpoints initially described in the beginning of this report to produce new knowledge for African feminism. Feminist epistemologies have guided the framing and deconstructing of the analysis. The methodologies employed have been very useful for thinking through the importance and application of new knowledges.

I am aware of the gaps in the work presented here and intend on ‘filling’ them through continued research and writing. It is my desire that the research here can contribute to the growing body of African Feminist theory. My initial intention was to “give voice” to women’s experiences that have not been accounted for in dominant discourses of knowledge production. This has been a reclaiming of that space. The personal growth experienced in this research and writing process has been immense and I am grateful for the opportunity to do work that takes “gender seriously”.

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The Girls at my apartment  
19<sup>th</sup> of November 2006



The Girls and I at my apartment  
19<sup>th</sup> of November 2006



19th of November 2006



### Hair Guide

To provide the reader with working definitions of the hairstyles being discussed, I have created a hair guide from which to refer to various hairstyles. The different hairstyles mentioned are illustrated in the following pages. These hairstyles are Cornrows; Braids; Relaxing; Weaves; Afro's; Dreadlocks; Twists.



# Afro



# Braids



# Hair being braided





# Cornrows



# Cornrows



## Dreadlocks



# Twists





# Twists





# A Weave



# A Weave

